A MESSAGE OF
FRANCIS LIBERMANN
FOR OUR TIME

SPIRITAN ARCHIVES
U.S.A.

You have laid your hand on me...

Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp.

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SPIRITAN ARCHIVES
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'You have formed me
And laid your hand on me' (Psalm 138).

Son of a rabbi of Alsace in France, Jacob Libermann was brought up in the strictest Jewish orthodoxy. At the age of twenty-four, at the end of many painful evasions, he was irresistibly drawn by God to the Christian faith and received baptism. He took the name of Francis and wished to consecrate himself to God in the priestly ministry, but the inexorable disease of epilepsy prevented him from becoming a priest until after long years of suffering. The same 'breath of God's Spirit', as he called it, oriented his life towards the service of the poorest. He founded a missionary institute — known today under the name of Spiritans or Holy Ghost Fathers — and directed it until his death in 1852 at the age of fifty. In the length and breadth of his huge correspondence he is valued as 'one of the great spiritual writers of our time'.

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'Of the race of Israel... a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents' *(Phil. 3:5).*

◀ *The house in Saverne where Fr Libermann was born, as it existed until 1968.*

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Jacob Libermann's childhood unfolded in the shadow of the synagogue where his father was rabbi, in the hermetically enclosed atmosphere of the Saverne ghetto. There was nothing to distinguish him from his fellow-students except perhaps a great gentleness, a lively sensitivity and a somewhat unhealthy shyness which naturally left him open to their teasing. Of precocious intelligence, his memory disciplined by talmudic Hebrew, an indefatigable worker, he was a child in whom the rabbi placed his legitimate hopes. His father had a room reserved for poor people to pass the night; Jacob of the heart of gold was their pet. One single important event marked his adolescence, his mother Lea's death. He was eleven at the time and would keep a tender memory of her forever. When he spoke of Mary later, this memory came back to him spontaneously.

Be with Mary as a little child with its dear mother.
When he gets a bruise he goes to show it immediately to his mother;
he is less preoccupied with the cure than with his desire to have his mother see the wound,
so that she will show him tenderness and give him a little hug.
His mother hugs him and dresses the wound,
and the little one, without worrying about the cure, is content and quiet.
His mother has given him a kiss and said a little loving word,
and that satisfies him.

(N.D., VIII, 206) 1846.

It was settled that he would become a rabbi. So in the autumn of 1822 his father sent him for four years of study to the Talmudic School of Metz, where two of his friends were professors. It was there, he said later, that God *disposed his heart* for the Christian faith. He himself gave a long account of this in 1850 in the course of a conversation with a priest of St Sulpice, in a quiet corner of the garden of the Holy Ghost Motherhouse in the Rue Lhomond, Paris. Fr Gamon wrote down the words immediately afterwards *in substance and often in the very terms*.

I was about twenty
when it pleased God to begin the work of my conversion.

My father, who was a distinguished rabbi,
had me study the science of the Talmud with himself until then.
He was happy with my progress and took pleasure in the thought
that one day he would leave me heir to his position and knowledge
and to the good esteem he enjoyed among his coreligionists.
Around the time I speak of,
he decided to send me to Metz to complete my studies.
In doing this
he was less interested in having me acquire a knowledge
which I could certainly have had just as well from himself
than in giving me an occasion to make my own skill and talents known,
and to make a name among the rabbis
who came in great numbers to that town to further their education.
He gave me letters of introduction for two professors of the Israelite School,
one of whom had been his student and the other his friend.
At that point the merciful action of Providence began to make itself felt.
God, who was trying to draw me out of the error in which I was plunged,
disposed my heart for his action
by having me experience annoyances and rebuffs which I was far from expecting.

(N.D., I, 61) 1850.

Samson, the eldest, was the first member of the Libermann family to become a Christian. He said himself that his brother Jacob used to profess a *boundless veneration for him and trust in him*.

Meanwhile my elder brother had just passed over to Christianity.
At first I attributed his step to natural motives.

Relative to Judaism, I considered he was in about the same position as myself,
but I blamed him for upsetting my family by his renunciation.
Still I did not fall out with him;
we even kept up a correspondence at this time.
I began it by a letter
in which I reproached him somewhat for his step,
and let him know my thoughts on the Bible miracles.
I told him, among other things,
that God's conduct would be inexplicable if God's miracles were true;
it was incomprehensible that God would have worked so many of them
for our idolatrous and prevaricating fathers,
while he was working no more of them for their children,
who had been serving him for so long with perfect fidelity.
I concluded by rejecting those former miracles
as an invention of the imagination and credulity of our fathers.

(N.D., I, 62) 1850.

Doubt soon led him into *deep sadness*, then to *religious indifference*, and within a few months to *a complete absence of faith*.

One of my fellow-students showed me at this time
a book in unpointed Hebrew, which he could not read
because he was only beginning the study of Hebrew.
I went through it quickly; it was the gospel translated into Hebrew.
I was very struck by this reading.
Nevertheless, there again
the many miracles that Jesus worked put me off.

I set about reading Rousseau's *Émile.*
Who would have thought that this work, so apt to shake a believer's faith,
would be one of the means God used to lead me to the true religion?
It is in the Confession of a priest from Savoy
that the passage occurs which struck me.
There Rousseau gives his reasons for and against Christ's divinity,
and he concludes with these words:

'I have not been able as yet
to know what an Amsterdam rabbi would say to that'.

To this challenge I could not help admitting in my heart
that neither did I see what reply there was.

(N.D., I, 63) 1850.

A Jewish friend advised him to go to Paris to see Mr Drach. Drach had been director of the modern Jewish School of Paris and had become a Christian. *Miraculously,* Jacob obtained his father's *permission to make the journey to Paris.*

Mr Drach found me a place in Stanislas College and brought me there.
I was put up in a tiny room,
given the *History of Christian Doctrine* by Lhomond
as well as the same author's *History of Religion,*
and left alone.

It was an extremely painful moment for me.
The sight of that profound solitude,
of that room where a simple attic-window gave some light,
the thought of being so far from my family, from my acquaintances, from my country
– all this plunged me into deep sadness;
my heart felt oppressed by the deepest melancholy.

It was then that I remembered the God of my fathers
and threw myself on my knees,
begging him to enlighten me on the true religion.
I prayed
that if the belief of Christians was true he would let me know it,
and if it was false he would keep me far from it at once.
The Lord,
who is near to those who call on him from the bottom of their hearts,
heard my prayer.
Immediately,
I was enlightened, I saw the truth,
the faith penetrated my mind and heart.
Settling down to read Lhomond
I adhered easily and firmly
to all that was recounted of the life and death of Jesus Christ.
The mystery of the Eucharist itself,
although rather imprudently offered for my meditation,
did not repel me in the least.
I was believing everything without difficulty.
From this moment
I desired nothing so much as to see myself plunged in the sacred font.

(N.D., I, 65) 1850.

On Christmas Eve 1826, a Sunday, his wish was fulfilled. He was baptized in the college chapel under the names of Francis Mary Paul. A strong interior experience shook him from head to foot at the moment of baptism – it was the gratuitous overwhelming power of God's grace. This would become one of his favourite themes henceforth, *I owe to grace alone what I have become.*

I received baptism on Christmas Eve.
On this day also I was allowed to take my place at the holy table.
I can never sufficiently wonder at the admirable change that came over me
the moment the baptismal water poured over my forehead.
All my uncertainties and fears suddenly fell away.
Clerical dress,
towards which I used to feel some of that usual repugnance
which is proper to the Jewish nation,
did not appear in the same light any more;
I liked rather than feared it.
But above all I felt a courage and invincible strength
to practise the Christian law;
I was experiencing a gentle affection for everything that pertained to my new belief.

(N.D., I, 66) 1850.

A love for Mary was also given him by God at his baptism, like a choice gift to brighten his whole life.

When the baptism water poured over my Jewish head,
at that instant I loved Mary
whom I used to hate before.

(N.D., I, 99) A witness 1879.

'The love of God seizes us... so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for him' (St Paul).

When the holy water poured over my forehead
it seemed to me that I was in the midst of an immense globe of fire;

I was no longer living a life of mere nature;
I saw and heard nothing more of what was going on around me;
things impossible to describe were happening within me.

(N.D., I, 90) A witness 1879.

In his Commentary on St John's Gospel he was speaking of his personal experience when he interpreted Jesus' words, *Unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

After our baptism
the Holy Spirit dwells in us in a living and vivifying way;
he is here to become the principle of all our soul's movements.
It depends on us to let ourselves be impressed and influenced by him.

(C.S.J., 85) 1840.

Immediately after baptism he manifested his desire to become a priest. He would remain eight months in Stanislas College, be clothed in the soutane he once dreaded, and then enter the seminary of St Sulpice. Once again he was alluding to his personal experience when he described the first intimate hours of the apostles John and Andrew with Jesus.

They were not yet at that point of perfection
where, later, they would abandon all to follow their Master,
but they would be with him from time to time,
keeping close in order to see and hear him and enjoy the graces
he was giving them in abundance.
They were like all souls in the beginning,
when grace has touched them
and our Lord pursues and draws them.

They want to enjoy him from time to time
and they like to return to him.
This is an effect of Jesus' love on entering a soul,
it makes it insatiable.

(C.S.J., 51) 1840.

In a letter to his brother, Samson, he uttered some particularly revealing words, since all his life long he would be a man of shining interior peace.

I am always content, always happy;
my heart is always in perfect tranquillity
and nothing will be able to trouble this peace.

(N.D., I, 149) 1828.

Learning about the conversion, his father, the rabbi, gave vent to his anger in a letter wherein he heaped the worst curses of Israel on his once favourite son and considered him as dead, cut off from his family. *But I am a Christian,* Francis would repeat in tears. His father died in 1831 without forgiving him.

NO FUTURE

It seems that his father's imprecatory curse may have badly shaken Francis' nervous system, already affected by his severe upbringing in Saverne, by the heart-wrenchings which preceded his conversion and by the ascetic regime he followed in the seminary. What was obviously an epileptic crisis struck him down in March 1829 in the room of his spiritual director, Fr Carbon, on the eve of his ordination to the subdiaconate. Other attacks were to follow chronically at widening intervals of time. But the verdict was clear, he could not be ordained a priest before being completely healed. His student burse was withdrawn. Physical trials — migraine, fainting, a nervous tic — went hand in hand with the moral trial of loneliness and distress. The net result was his unshakable trust in God.

My nerves have been playing tricks with me.
I believe that mental work has tired me out.
I was engaged in the study of theology all day long without respite,
and now, as soon as I want to work a little,
I feel a tightening in my head
as if my forehead and temples were bound with an iron band.
All this will oblige me to rest for some years
until my health is completely recovered...
I do not know yet where I will go. *(N.D., I, 150) 1829.*

What was to be done except abandon himself totally to divine providence, and wait?

As for the world, I cannot go back to it;
God, I hope, will see to providing for my lot...
My Father who is in heaven will well know what to do with me;
my body, my soul, all my being belongs to him
and depends on him completely...
I am pleased to have no other resource than God alone. *(N.D., I, 154-159) 1830.*

Without house or home, **Francis Libermann experienced the insecurity of the poor.**

Father Superior may perhaps still hope
to have me ordained in a year or two;
still, I rather think he is keeping me out of charity,
for he knows that I have nothing and he pities me.

(L.S., I, 12) 1830.

To a person who envied him for being always calm and smiling, he said one day in confidence:

I hope you will not have to be sifted in life as I have,
I hope life will never be the burden for you that it has been for me;
I never cross a bridge
without the thought of throwing myself over the parapet,
to put an end to these afflictions.
But the sight of my Jesus sustains me and gives me patience..

(N.D., I, 190) A witness 1853.

To a person afflicted with nervous troubles, he explained, by way of encouragement, his own psychological and spiritual way of acting.

I was subject to that sort of sickness in my young days, very violently at that.
What did me most harm
was the fear, the disquietude, the precautions.
It is essential to shake off these movements, these agitations of soul,
to distract attention from yourself at those moments,
not to let yourself become preoccupied by a nervous anguish of heart,

but to take forceful action against these sentiments
and place yourself in great indifference before God,
to master the hurt and not be mastered by it.
Thus disposed,
you will act as if you had never suffered trials.
I am telling you
how I proceeded since I began to give myself to the good God.
I followed this line in a spirit of faith and in the desire to please God,
without a thought of recuperating my health by this means,
because I never suspected that this way of acting would be useful.
In effect, it played a large part in my cure.

(N.D., VII, 238) 1845.

In one of his first *spiritual* letters, he opens his heart to Mr Viot, one of his seminarian friends.

You write to say you would like to see me happy.
I do not understand what you mean by that.
Would you like to see me rich, in good health, with nothing to suffer here below?
Do you really want to place me in hell?
O my dear friend,
leave me my dear poverty, my dear sickness, and a thousand sufferings more;
sufferings alone can bring me to resemble our Lord Jesus Christ.
If you want to see me happy, come and visit me
and your desire will be fulfilled.
I am a Christian,
our Lord Jesus Christ died for me,
I am almost overwhelmed by his benefits and graces,

I have a little taste of his sufferings and cross,
I hope he will give me still more,
and should I not be happy?
What do we need, then, to be happy?

(L.S., I, 17) 1830.

***What a treasure my sickness is*! To his brother, Samson, and his sister-in-law he spoke of his sickness as a purifying trial.**

So, my dear friends,
I can assure you that my dear sickness is a treasure for me...
I hope that if our Lord Jesus Christ
continues to give me grace as he has up to now,
grace which I do not deserve at all,
I will lead a perfectly poor life entirely employed in his service.
Then I will be richer than if I were to possess the whole world,
and I defy the world to find me a happier person,
for who is richer than the person who wants nothing?
Who is happier than the one whose desires are accomplished?
So why worry yourselves about me?
Are you afraid I will die of hunger?
What! The Lord nourishes the birds of the field,
and will he not find a way to nourish me too?
He loves me more than the birds of the field.

But, you will say,
if I was a priest
I could have a position and come to the help of my family.

No, my dear friends, that will never be.
My body, my soul, my whole being are for God;
and if I knew that there was still a little vein in me which was not for him
I would tear it out and trample it underfoot in the mud and dust.
Whether I be a priest or not,
whether I be a millionaire or a beggar,
all I am and all I possess is for God
and for no one else but him...

(L.S., I, 10) 1830.

Fr Courbon was an author after the manner of the French School of spirituality, famous for his works on methods of mental prayer; he was particularly popular at St Sulpice. But Francis Libermann dissociated himself from all schools. Already he possessed his privileged way to God, that of simplicity and confidence, which is often compared with that of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, who lived later. At the end of his life he gave an explanation to his nephew, Xavier Libermann, who had entered the Holy Ghost Congregation.

At first I was in affective prayer.
I passed through the most ordinary as well as the most intense degrees...
When I found myself at an awkward stage,
my director gave me Courbon to read so as to enlighten my way of prayer.
Well, I found nothing precise in any of the described sections,
none of them described my different states...
The reading upset me completely and my director told me to give it up.
Look on your Courbon rules as null and void.
and simply go your way with confidence in God's guidance and divine goodness.

(N.D., XIII, 132) 1851.

To console and comfort one of his confreres, he told him as a secret — *'on condition that you will never speak of it to anyone'* — how overpowering God's action was and how he was totally at its disposal.

I must tell you, then, that I never made mental prayer on the virtues,
even on the virtues of Jesus and Mary,
that I was never able to draw a conclusion
or take any resolution to practise virtues, at the end of my mental prayer.
I could never even reflect on the virtues
in order to know what to do or teach.
This I have attributed
sometimes to a disorder in my own nervous system,
sometimes to a natural incapacity.
I really feel that my mind has developed a power, a clarity,
and my judgement breadth and rectitude,
but certainly it is grace alone
which has created that which was not,
which has strengthened what was feeble,
and rectified what was defective.
So clear and true is this
that if I became an unbeliever
my mind would never be able to deny the existence and action of grace in my soul.
In short, nothing in me
by way of knowledge in the intelligence,
will-power,
or the practice of virtue, has been acquired.
God gave everything.
He drew me along without asking leave,
with a violence which I have not perceived in anyone else up to now.

At first I was very lax,
very indifferent, uninterested in the whole supernatural life.
Our Lord gave me the grace
to stand up to my father who wanted to snatch me from the faith.
I renounced him rather than the faith.
After that,
our good Master came unexpectedly to snatch me from myself
and held my faculties absorbed and captive for about five years;
during all this time
I had no thought of working at any one virtue.
My whole preoccupation was to be with him,
and that came very easy.
During all this time
I had no clear idea of spiritual things.

(N.D., VIII, 203) 1846.

'God, you are my God'.
'A land parched, weary and waterless, my soul is thirsting for you' (Ps. 62).
Thirst for God! Libermann often showed how Jesus hears the prayers of souls *who desire*. Here in the Commentary on St John's Gospel he voiced his own thirst, echoing that of Jesus, in one of the most lyrical prayers he composed.

He calls those who thirst and he is himself parched with thirst;
the difference is that those he calls
are thirsting to drink from his fountains of grace
as a result of their weakness
and of being deprived as they are of that salutary water
which can satiate their empty and perishing souls,

while Jesus thirsts to give them to drink
through the abundance of his love for souls.
He has a burning desire to fill all souls and satiate them.
This thirst is so immense
that the burning desires of all parched souls together
cannot be compared
with that of Jesus for each one of them.
'If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink'.
O my Lord Jesus, I hear your cry.
You call me, Lord; here I am; I thirst.
Great is my thirst, even to fainting,
for I am empty and burnt up inside.
Take me into yourself,
and give me to drink from your fountain of salvation;
plunge me into it, submerge me, drown me in your heavenly waters.
Yes, Lord, I beg you,
drown me in these most desirable and desired waters,
drown my concupiscence,
drown my pride,
drown all my vices and defects,
so that everything of myself and from myself may die;
let the old creature no longer live,
let there be nothing more in me but yourself.
Give me this grace, O Jesus,
so that I may live no longer except by your life and in your life,
by which you live in your Father's bosom
and in the whole body of your elect.

(C.S.J., 338) 1840.

THE SPIRITUAL MASTER

Francis Libermann arrived at Issy-les-Moulineaux, near Paris, at the beginning of winter, 1831. He would remain there six years in the role of messenger for the bursar and seminarians, particularly for their purchases in Paris. From this network of relationships, bonds of friendship, then of confidence, would be forged. Little by little he would become the spiritual director of many of them — even the professors — and leader of groups of piety in the seminary. One of these professors said about him, *He had the secret of doing the most common actions in an uncommon manner, that is to say, he did them in our Lord... His heart was always full of God, seeing him alone in everything; he inflamed us in all his conversations... The hand of God was on him.* And Fr Carbon: *God wanted to give St Sulpice a model to reform it; that is why he detained Mr Libermann there so long.*

The first letters we call *spiritual* date from this period, written to seminarians who asked for his advice. These letters, as well as his slips of paper, used to be treasured, recopied and passed from hand to hand. He was to excel in this style, *conversation in writing,* for which he was marvellously gifted. He would communicate through the tip of his pen the lights coming directly from the Holy Spirit, in a style both vigorous and awkward — he did not learn French until he was twenty! — a bearer always of hope and peace. Sharing at first in the exaggerated wording of the French School, which was in vogue at St Sulpice at that time, being also an admirable commentator on de Condren, de Bérulle and, above all, Olier for the seminarians, he freed himself fairly soon from their influence. Starting from his own personal religious experience he became promoter of an original spiritual doctrine for all those people — priests, seminarians, laity — who aspire to the *life hidden with Christ in God* (Col. 3:3): he centres the whole interior life on the preponderating action of the sanctifying Spirit and on the necessary conditions for allowing oneself to be led by him. *Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God* (Rom. 8).

He affirmed that he held these gifts of wisdom and counsel from God, to be of service in helping others spiritually. Is not this the very definition of the true spiritual director?

I believe that God has been pleased
to give me a particular grace for the truths of salvation
and the direction of certain souls.
People are mistaken about me in this
and take me for what in fact I am not
and for what I have never been.
It is a grace purely for others,
I get nothing from it for myself.
I am like those people
who send important messages by telegraph
and get nothing out of it except a small salary
for the trouble they give themselves,
while they do not even understand what they send.

(L.S., IV, 320) 1846.

Where did this knowledge come from? It came from that interior and living source who is the Holy Spirit himself, and from Libermann's personal experience of his action.

What means can a director use
for coming to know God's general guidance of a soul,
whether in its fundamental condition
or in its particular attractions,
if not God's light alone
which he must receive in prayer and in continual union with our Lord?

St Paul's words apply well here:
'As in human things it is only the human spirit that can judge,
likewise in divine things it is only God's Spirit that can discern'.
And if we are closely united to this Spirit
he will have us penetrate into the depths of the divinity
when that is helpful for the salvation of souls.

(L.S., II, 311) 1839.

First stir up the desire for holiness and encourage interior peace; in time, purification of the senses will take place unobserved, and the heart will open to the divine gift of infused contemplation. Francis Libermann spoke from knowledge, he was describing his own itinerary.

When I noticed a soul that was tending to higher things,
I mean a soul that seemed to be called to the perfection of the interior life
(and there are more of those than you would think),
I would begin by giving it a strong idea of Christian perfection
so that it would be struck and carried away.
I would act like that
because in its interior God was pushing it violently.
Seeing the height and beauty of its object
it would be ravished by it
and develop a violent desire
to come to so beautiful and admirable a state.
But at that very moment
I would try to keep it away from too much movement,
from precipitation, trouble, disquietude, and so on,
so as to keep it in repose

and all the time face to face with God,
following all his movements more easily.
This peace would dispose it little by little for the interior life
and always lead it to contemplation as well as to renunciation.

(L.S., II, 388) 1839.

To remain present to the Holy Spirit who will bring about the work of holiness in us — it reminds us of St Thérèse's parable of the divine lift.

Enter most deeply into your innermost self and never come out.
If you do that, your joy will be full
and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will flood your soul...
For in so far as you remain withdrawn thus into your heart of hearts
you will always find the Holy Spirit there,
who will lift you up and transport you to the top of that mountain of love
which our Lord has built for his elect,
and he will fill you with his graces, lights, beauty and happiness.

(L.S., I, 126) 1835.

This calls for the attitude of a poor person who awaits everything from the Lord with assurance, despite his own weakness or rather because of it. To be disposed to desire and receive everything from him since he loves us, that is the secret of happiness. *How happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven*! (Mt 5:3).

Up to now
you have been in the habit of working on your own
and considering your work and concentration of some value.

This explains why you become discouraged when you see your weakness.
But once you have abandoned yourself into God's hands
you will grow accustomed little by little to seeing your great uselessness and incapacity;
you will recognize that God alone should be and do all things in you,
and you will throw yourself headlong into his arms,
with a clear sight of your own lowliness and poverty.
You will take delight in that view
and then you will begin to make some progress.

(L.S., II, 231) 1839.

> ***Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest*** **(Mt 11:29).**
>
> **Libermann added,** ***Crosses are pure gold, but humiliations are pearls and precious stones.***

Never let yourself be discouraged by your weaknesses.
Whenever you think you have committed some fault,
reflect back gently on yourself;
then present yourself before our Lord
in great but gentle interior humiliation at the sight of your miseries.
But it is essential that this sentiment be accompanied by filial love,
by the desire to please him, and by full, gentle confidence
that, far from being angry with you,
he will take pity on your weakness, misery and poverty.
That done, stay calm
and know that you are still all for Jesus and Mary.

(L.S., II, 208) 1839.

Little by little, become passive under the predominating action of the Holy Spirit. By a slip of the pen he wrote *passibility* for *passivity*, but the term leaves it to be understood that he meant the active passivity of one who allows himself to be led in full and conscious freedom. *The impression of grace is so violent, and the love it inspires so lively, that the soul, despite all its ardent movement, is more passive than active* (C.S.J., 621).

It would be good from the very outset
to moderate your exterior actions in some small way
so as to keep your soul in perfect stillness
and remain always in tranquil and interior attention
to the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is in you.
These, I think,
are about the most important things for that peace and interior calm
which, when well practised, place us in a state of passivity before God,
whereby we remain perfectly calm before him,
so that he can act in us
according to all the fulness of his will.
It is quite certain that the greatest saints served him in this manner,
and I believe this is what they called the 'passive way'.

(L.S., I, 74) 1835.

The Spirit has freed me! **St Paul's cry in the letter to the Romans was echoed by Libermann in a particularly judicious piece of advice addressed to a seminary director.**

Try to keep your mind always free, bright and open...
This openness of mind and heart is indispensable
for acquiring a true interior spirit.
It is essential that you be open, simple and gentle with everyone...

Go your way cheerfully, simply,
without dissipation,
but without strain or inhibition,
without thought of being well or ill judged, of pleasing or displeasing,
without wanting to appear important,
to attract people's esteem or good-will.
God alone, have God always in view,
and your spirit will have that freedom.
In the course of conversation observe moderation, peace, gentleness,
not centered too much on yourself.
Forget yourself completely.
In fact, every time you start thinking about yourself
you will become complicated.
Once recreation is over, think no more about what you have said and done...
If an indiscreet word which may have displeased a confrere escaped you
do not bother about it;
humble yourself before God in all tranquillity
and think no more about it...
Yes, forget yourself as much as you can
so that your mind and heart may be taken up with God alone.
This is one of the most important things for you.

(L.S., II, 341) 1839.

God's works and ways are simple. ***Love and do what you wish.***

A cardinal principle in the spiritual life
is to simplify things as much as possible.

The more simple and uniform our way of acting is
the more perfect it is,
and the more easily will we put up with ourselves too.

(L.S., I, 419) 1838.

In the affairs of the spiritual life, as in the world of art, simplicity is not a starting point but a point of arrival.

About genuine simplicity
plenty could be said,
because generally people do not know what it is.
It is looked on as something ordinary,
while in fact it is the virtue of the perfect.

(L.S., I, 238) 1836.

Prayer, whether in times of solitude or throughout the day, possesses the same trait of simplicity.

Mental prayer is an important business but a very simple business...
It should consist
in a repose which is simple, peaceful and full of confidence before our Lord;
that is all.
There is no need to look for lots of reflections or produce lots of acts of the will.
Nothing must be forced on your part.
Stand before Jesus
like a poor destitute child before his father,
nothing more...
Stand before him with the simple desire to be at his service.

Be content with a glance of your soul towards him, from time to time, with that intention;
the same thing in the course of the day –
from time to time an effortless glance, aware of belonging to him
and aware of your own poverty,
always with peace
and in the calm desire to belong to him just as you are.
Look for nothing more.

(N.D., VII, 37) 1845.

Die in order to live. **Francis Libermann explained how death to ourselves is lived out when the Holy Spirit is guiding us.**

In order that all the powers of our heart
may be surrounded, wrapped around and filled with the Spirit of Jesus,
we must be dead to ourselves and everything.
This is our great employment, to die to ourselves.
I think I remember telling you this before.
All we have to do,
all our soul must apply itself to,
is to dispose itself
using the help of the grace which is very strong in us
through our Master's mercy,
to follow the movements and impressions of the Spirit, who is in us.
This is to be your whole line of action.
Do not work with violence,
do not make efforts to unite yourself more or less perfectly to God.
The uniting of our soul with God is our Lord's work,
and not ours.

It is the Spirit who must work in our souls,
more or less perfectly according to God's plans for us
and according to our fidelity in corresponding.
Without him, all your effort and all your work
will be useless, even harmful;
for the more you labour to obtain this union with God
the more will there be of your own activity,
and the more there is of your own activity
the less will there be of the Holy Spirit's activity,
who alone, nevertheless, can produce this union in its different degrees,
while our own activity and efforts are worthless.

(N.D., III, 102) 1842.

Be satisfied to be a poor fellow... **How many times he used this expression! But he indicated its marvellous fruit in one expression which is unique in spiritual literature, *the form of God will appear in your soul.* Elsewhere he invites us to be simple as the clay which does not resist the potter's will giving it the form he desires (L.S., III, 160). He wrote, *All our glory is to be forms to receive God into them* (E.S., 217).**

When we enter this way of pure faith disengaged from the senses,
we see ourselves as a heap of misery.
For all that, we must not trouble ourselves or get agitated
but wait until it pleases God to deliver us.
If he does not judge that opportune,
we content ourselves with being poor people before him,
knowing that nothing we do is worth anything
but, at the same time, that he will do everything in us.

In this way,
we come little by little to act no more by our own movement;
it is the Spirit of our Lord who then does everything in us,
and gradually we acquire a supernatural force in all our activity.
Nothing can stop us,
and our activity becomes activity wholly divine,
because nothing more of ourselves is found in it
and the Spirit of our Lord alone carries it out in us,
at least in great part.

At first we do not see all this,
and we consider ourselves lukewarm or bad.
Still, there must be no worrying but always the intention to persevere;
the light will come before long and the form of God will appear in our soul.

(L.S., I, 414) 1838.

This, then, is the heart of Libermannian spirituality – docility to the Person of the Spirit of God living in us. Who better than he knew how to describe the science and art of living under the Spirit's movements?

All you have to do
is keep yourself docile and pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life,
whom our Lord has placed in your soul
to be your all.
He must be the principle and unique source
of all your affections, all your desires and all the movements of your soul;
he must be the driving-power of your mind and the guide of your soul
through the movements he implants there.

It pertains to him alone
to give you any impetus or impression whatsoever,
and it pertains to him also
to get you to put that impetus or impression into practice,
for if you mix your own violent activity with it you will only spoil everything.

(L.S., I, 366) 1837.

Be holy because I am holy, **said the Lord. To be holy is to enter into a communion of filial life with the Father, through Jesus, under the action of the Spirit of love.**

Be holy, my dear friend, because the Father of our Lord is holy
and because his Spirit who must live and act in you is holy.
Enter fully into the plans of holiness which our Master has for you.
Your life will no longer be your own, it will be that of Jesus Christ's Spirit in you.
To achieve this, he must be the sole light of your mind,
the sole driving-power of your will and all your activity,
the sole desire of your heart,
the centre and principle of all the affections of your soul.
There must be no hint
of anything foreign to this Spirit of holiness and love in you.
Your soul must experience no sentiment or sensation
or impression whatsoever,
it must have no life,
except in this Spirit and by this Spirit of Jesus' love.
Then you will be able to say that he lives in you and is your life,
and, if he is your life, your life will be one of holiness,
since he contains all holiness in himself,
his life is holiness itself.

(L.S., I, 301) 1837.

He outlined with fine imagery the respective roles of the Spirit of God and the human heart, soul and mind.

A point now about your general way of acting.
A ship has sails and a rudder;
the wind blows into the sail,
getting the ship to proceed as it should,
so it advances by its sails and takes its general direction.
Yet this direction could be too vague
and could lead the ship astray at times.
So there is the rudder,
to guide it exactly in its due course
without straying in any way.
Your soul is the ship,
your heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind;
he blows into your will and your soul goes forward,
proceeding towards the goal God proposes for it.
Your mind is the rudder to prevent you,
in the strength and vivacity of the movement given to your heart,
from departing from the straight line determined by the divine goodness.

(N.D., VII, 148) 1845.

If we were looking for a synthesis of the deep personal life of Fr Libermann and his spiritual doctrine, we would find it in this admirable text composed for the feast of Pentecost.

If our Lord gives us his Holy Spirit,
it is not so that, even partly, we may live according to our own spirit.
He must be our leader, our love, our all.

Since the quality proper to this Spirit is to be God's love,
it follows that everything in us must proceed from this love,
be accompanied by it and go straight to God.
He has been given to us to be the life of our soul;
consequently the love of God alone ought to fill it
and penetrate all its faculties and powers.
It is dead of itself, if God does not reside there,
it becomes living only by the Holy Spirit;
so it has no life except by the movement he gives it,
every other love and activity is dead.

If we want to hear and see him and go forward under his guidance,
we must attend to his inspirations,
keep our glance continually turned towards him,
practise interior silence,
that is, of all our passions and all the faculties of our soul,
avoid too great interior action, rushing and activity,
moderate all violent movements,
even those whose object is something good,
wish to know no other wisdom or prudence
than what comes from the Holy Spirit,
and by this interior path
avoid all natural efforts to become united to him,
and simply take care to avoid the obstacles
which arise from rushing around and being attached to creatures and to ourselves.

All this must take place in complete peace and tranquillity of soul,
and it is in this disposition

that we must await from him whatever he will please to show us
and have us carry out,
always in readiness to follow and never precede him.

(E.S., Suppl., 79) 1836?

He saw Mary as the living example of fidelity to the Holy Spirit and spoke of her in phrases reminiscent of St Grignion de Montfort.

It would be a great and admirable thing
for the Holy Spirit to accomplish in our souls
this holy union with Jesus in Mary and with Mary in Jesus.
May Jesus live in us as he lived in Mary.
May we be united to Mary as she was united with Jesus,
in a union of desire, a union of love, a union of will, a union of vision.
May Jesus' Spirit
be our whole occupation, movement and life,
to unite us and make us one thing with himself
in Mary, through Mary and with Mary.

(L.S., II, 424) 1840.

FINAL PURIFICATIONS

In 1837 the Superior General of the Eudists asked the Sulpicians to find them a master of novices to restart their novitiate at Rennes. *Take Mr Libermann*, he was told; *he is only a cleric in minor orders but he will do the work of a priest.* The Superior General, on the advice of his spiritual director, trusted Providence and accepted.

Alas! On the pretext of having his virtue tried, he was placed among the novices. *I am not the novitiate director*, he wrote, *on the contrary I am the last of all.* Another ambiguous situation was that he — *the last of the novices* — was to give talks to his companions who were deacons and priests, *and to form their consciences.* He saw himself criticized and contradicted. He who was so well listened to at Issy seemed to be touching hearts no longer. His best friend let him down. His nervous tension was wearing him out. He had an attack of epilepsy and fell to the ground at the start of a talk...

Failure. It was a failure of a particular type which must be examined closely to see what might be, for the apostolic person, the final purifications of the night of the spirit before the dawn of a permanent union with God, and at the same time the purification of the *instrument* God would use for an extraordinary mission.

First recognition: his uselessness in the Church of God, at a moment when everyone had the highest esteem for him. This is a strange trial, well known to the saints.

I am becoming famous,
but strictly and sincerely and in all truth
I am a useless vessel in God's Church.
I certify to that
in the presence of our Lord Jesus, who knows better than I
the truth of what I say,

that I am here like a piece of worm-eaten wood
which can only half catch fire, and that feebly,
which enlightens and warms nobody...
I am like a paralytic
who wants to get himself moving and cannot.

(L.S., II, 293) 1839.

Second trial: God's apparent abandonment!

There were times
when I believed our Lord and Master was going to abandon and reject me.
Continue to pray that this may come to nothing,
for I am not yet delivered from this anxiety.
I abandon myself and hand myself over to the heavenly Father's disposal,
so that he may do with everything, and in particular with me,
all that seems good to him.
In life and death, in time and eternity,
everything for him and in him alone.
May he alone, and all he wishes, live and reign in everything and everywhere.

(L.S., I, 352) 1837.

Another recognition *in the heart of the darkness* (Ruysbroeck): he has done harm to all those entrusted to him.

I am totally convinced about one thing I see,
that I have done great harm
to the souls it pleased our Lord to bring me into contact with,

and that I still do this every day
and will be doing it all my life,
unless our good Master pleases
to check the course of my misery and evil interior state.
This is the reason for my great fear over the past two months.
I did not know where it was coming from, but it must be this.

(L.S., II, 47) 1838.

In several letters that year he spoke of his inability to lead others.

You will say that I am, or rather that I am pretending to be, humble.
But what can I do?
I have examined everything
in the desire to say something that could give you satisfaction
and be useful for you,
and I have seen about as clearly as a blind man at midnight!
Do not be troubled at what I say here,
and do not think it is through ill-will I say nothing edifying.
The only grain of truth in what I am saying
is that I am incapable of the least good
and that I am completely useless.
I am not short of desires –
they are immense but worthless, fruitless and dead.
Do not deceive yourself by drawing water from an empty cistern!

(L.S., II, 294) 1839.

But a ray of hope still shone in the bottom of his heart. When God comes close to someone who has given him his life, dark night has to fall so that God can take full possession.

May Jesus and his cross fill our souls!
This cross has weighed very heavily on me for a long time;
may the holy name of God be praised and adored!
It pleases our good Master to strike us in the most sensitive manner.
For the past three months I have been crushed under the weight of this cross.
I do not wish to speak to you about it,
for fear of seeking human consolation
whereas Jesus alone should be our all.

(N.D., I, 496) 1838.

The next letter is particularly moving; it indicates how much God was purifying him in his last defences.

We must distrust ourselves all the time,
distrust everything we do, everything we say and think.
We have to be circumspect,
and not act with that boldness
which manifests itself at times under the guise of genuine abandonment to God,
and yet is far from it.
Let everything be done in God, gently, unpretentiously.
O dear brothers,
how perilous
is all that haughtiness of mind, that presumption in acting,
that determination and violence in the will.
You have no idea!

(L.S., I, 503) 1838.

We might be surprised at the exaggerated terms he uses to describe a passing pedagogical failure with three or four novices who were entrusted to him and who later on would acknowledge his great virtue. In fact the trial threw him totally on the divine goodness and mercy, and also made him more indulgent and careful in guiding people.

In all these miseries
it pleased God to let me see my own, which doubtless is the greatest;
it is only that his goodness and mercy towards me are quite outstanding,
quite extraordinary;
anything like it
I have never read in a book or heard recounted.
He is Master of all things,
and it is not for me to ask him why he acts like that.
It has pleased him,
and that should fill me with joy and love;
but observe the incomprehensible ways of divine Wisdom!

Another very important thing
it pleased our Lord to show me in this circumstance
is our extreme uselessness and incapacity.
You have no idea what we are worth,
or rather what we are not worth.

Far from being useful for something, we are only good for ruining everything;
and it seems to me that, if God did not stop the evil we do,
all the works we undertake
would only turn to the detriment and loss of souls.

(N.D., I, 502) 1838.

At this period he explained to a seminarian who was exposed to the first night, the night of the senses, how to live through these interior dark nights and why they are necessary.

It is the night of the cross, of privation, of interior darkness,
where the senses have no part to play and are worthless and dead.
It is the time to live by faith,
but a faith full of hope in the divine goodness,
and at the same time full of fear and distrust of self,
in all gentleness and peace.
This is an excellent night,
for souls are brought to perfection in it and through it,
and little by little they shed their abundant faults.

(L.S., II, 266) 1839.

The supreme rule...

The supreme rule for all souls wishing to live for Jesus
is to give little importance to themselves and much to others.
Moreover they must develop a very strong habit
or never stopping to ponder over God's graces in them.
Their mind must be borne towards our Lord to love him unceasingly,
and particularly in each activity,
in order to please him and be acceptable to him in each one of them
and do it in his love.
Their mind must not run after these lights or seek them,
but tend simply towards our Lord with love.

'He who follows me', he says.
We have only to follow him, that is our whole employment;
the rest is his concern, and his alone.

(C.S.J., 380) 1840.

The prayer of those who live for *God alone* will be uttered in the future by a great number of apostles who experience the same interior liberation. Like him, they will be purified by God on the very occasion of their apostolate at moments of providential happenings, always unforeseen and unforeseeable.

Never want to advance further than is given to you from on high.
Be content to aim at renouncing yourself in everything
and having a peaceful desire to live for God alone;
then wait in all tranquillity
until it pleases him to give you what he thinks fit.
Make no demands on him or on yourself either.
Say calmly:

My Jesus,
you know well that I am nothing,
that I can do nothing,
that I am worth nothing.
Here I am as you find me,
that is, a poor nobody.
Take me,
if you are good enough to show that mercy.
I abandon myself and hand over myself into your hands
and I ask for nothing more.

(L.S., II, 392) 1839.

He had already left Rennes when he sent Fr Carbon a detailed account of his state of soul. But from now on the purification was accomplished, dawn was putting the night to flight...

All the time I spent in the Congregation of Jesus and Mary at Rennes
was a time of affliction and torments for me.
This is not what made me leave that poor Congregation;
but one of the things which influenced me in the decision
was that I saw myself absolutely worthless there
and incapable of doing anything for the glory of God...
This threw me, in the first year,
into a kind of stupor and consternation
because I had come from the seminary in Paris
where the good God blessed everything I was doing...
The troubles that the running of the novitiate caused me were so great
that I could never have believed I could tolerate anything of the kind.
But I can say in truth that the greatest of all
was to see myself useless in the Church of God.
I really saw this, it was not an effect of my imagination;
and the sight of it was accompanied by such great desires
to do something for God's glory
that this was my most painful cross.
I spent all that year in great interior listlessness,
without hope of ever getting out of it and without consolation,
but on the contrary everything added to my pain.

I could see myself going through the few days I had to pass in this world one by one,
fruitless and useless for our Lord's glory,
for which I wanted to be consumed all the time.

The sight of this was like a continual sore on my heart,
which I could see no hope of getting away from.
Anyone acquainted with this sort of thing at all
will agree with me.

To struggle against this thought, I used sometimes to say to myself
that I must put my trust in our Lord and the Blessed Virgin,
but then I would say to myself that this was a wrong trust.
Waiting like that, I would remain inactive,
my life would pass, my body would wear out,
and I would be good for nothing any more.
This is the condition I was in when I came to Paris during this vacation,
in the hope of finding some consolation and good advice.
I have found consolation
but not advice.
So I returned to Rennes somewhat consoled
by the thought that at least the good God was being served and glorified by others,
but deeply afflicted at being able to do nothing myself,
and resolved to go back into my tomb without ever again coming out,
if that was God's will.
But I could not resist the burning desire which was compelling me ceaselessly
to do something for the glory of our Lord and his holy Mother.

(N.D., I, 674) 1839.

This *something* was already under way. The above letter was written from Lyons when he was on the way to Rome to present his project of a missionary Institute to Propaganda Fide. Once more God had laid his hand on him, he had become *a man of God!*

'HERE I AM, SEND ME' *(Isaiah 6:8)*

On 3 December 1839, the feast of St Francis Xavier, Francis Libermann left Rennes for Rome to found the *Work of the Blacks*. This sudden move cannot be understood without knowing the interior attitude of total belonging to God that he had developed. The failure at Rennes had been a fruitful step in God's plan; now God showed his will in new signs. On 28 October 1839 a particular illumination was given to him by the holy heart of Mary *to make known the place she destined for him in her Church; this day, which he always looked on as one of the happiest of his life, was that of the feast of the apostles SS Simon and Jude* (Fr Tisserant's Memorandum).

Like Isaiah's vision in the temple — *Here I am, send me* — like that of Francis at San Damiano, like that of Ignatius at Manresa, this vision filled him with extraordinary light, certitude, peace and strength to consecrate his life to the most abandoned. Nothing would stop him until God had, through him, realized his plan for the salvation of Africa. The instrument was ready, pliant and docile despite its weakness. Once again, *God chose what was not, to confound what was.*

Already at the seminary of Issy he had heard moving accounts of the black slaves of Bourbon and Haiti. Later he had corresponded with Le Vavasseur and Tisserant, who were from those countries and wished to go to work for them, along with some friends. He had encouraged them in their generous initiative. This day he heard God's call in person. He agreed to put himself at their head and, if plenty of obstacles littered the way, if his enterprise was humanly fruitless, strong in the mysterious intuition possessing him he would wait *until the wall fell. I will leave it to our Lord to remove all obstacles*, he said.

He wrote plainly to the Eudist superior: *The order has come from God.*

God places us in a kind of necessity, while leaving us the full exercise of our freedom (E.S., 17).

What will become of me?
God alone knows, and no one on earth.
Now I have only one grace to ask of you, Father,
and that is not to try to stop me.
The order has come from God and my resolution is taken.
I have arranged my departure for next Monday,
this is important and necessary.
You know, Father Superior, how frail my nerves are.
I am afraid that the extreme pain I experience
when I think of the upset I will cause to all those around me,
whom I love with my whole heart,
will give me a bad jolt.
May the good pleasure of my Lord Jesus be done in that as well, but I ought to prevent it happening.

(L.S., II, 297) 1839.

He wrote this admirable letter from Lyons on 10 December to his brother, Samson, and his sister-in-law. Just before, on our Lady's feast, he was consoled again in his project at Our Lady of Fourvière.

I have left Rennes for good.
It is a great imprudence — not to say foolishness —
according to those who judge things as people of the world.
There I had a definite future,
I was sure of the wherewithal to live,
and even of a certain honourable existence.

But woe to me if I seek my ease on earth,
to live in honour and esteem.
Dear friends, remember one thing:
this earth passes, the life we live here lasts but an instant.
I have left Rennes.
I have not a single person or creature on earth
in whom I can put my trust.
I have nothing,
and I do not know what will become of me,
or how I can simply live and exist.
I will lead a despised life, forgotten, neglected, lost to the world.
I will be disapproved of
by a great number of those who used to like and esteem me before.
Perhaps I will be treated as out of my senses or a proud man,
despised, even persecuted.
Have no fear or apprehension,
realize that I am the happiest man in the world
because I have nothing but God alone.

(L.S., II, 300) 1839.

He was not short of humiliations in Lyons. He offered to serve Mass and was turned away; he knocked at the door of a lady whom he had helped by his letters — she took pity on him and gave him an alms; a superior of a religious house burst out laughing when he heard of his project!

I have left Rennes to begin the Work to the Blacks.
There is nothing fixed and definite yet.
I am going to Rome with Mr de la Brunière.

God alone knows what we will do there.
We will always have SS Peter and Paul,
at whose tombs we will pray, if God is good to us.
I will employ my time
thinking about the plan of life we have to adopt,
and once these things are in order
we will take steps to obtain whatever is necessary from the Holy See.

For my part, you see my situation:
abandoned and cut off from all help,
not even having means of support
or a way to earn my livelihood
or where to lay my head
and, on top of that, no hope from any human being.
It is more than enough to bring a poor man like me to despair.
But Jesus and Mary are my all.
That is the sort of work I am going to undertake.
I am going to talk with the great and powerful;
will they even look at me?
I am lost, then, without resources.
I admit that when I think of it I consider it foolishness,
and I would consider it as presumption
if I did not feel great humiliation in my soul before God
for daring to get involved in such an affair.
I do not understand it at all,
and sometimes I am too astonished to know what to think about it.
But my trust is in our Lord;
he will act according to his good pleasure.

One thing which greatly consoles me
is that, in any case, whether I succeed or not,
I will have had the happiness of sacrificing myself for love of our Lord.

(L.S., II, 319) 1839.

Later on he would recount to the parish priest of Our Lady of Victories in Paris why he came directly to Rome. It was to have his interior call confirmed and *to know the divine will.*

The difficulties far surpassed our weakness
and, considering things by the light of reason alone,
we looked on our enterprise as impossible,
but at the same time we all had a strong conviction that we would succeed.
On the one hand I felt a deep sadness,
and I dared not make our project known to anyone
because it seemed folly to me according to right reason,
and must appear such to any reasonable person.
On the other hand I felt a strong drive within me
and a sentiment of great trust in the holy heart of Mary,
a conviction that we would succeed.

The few people to whom I made known my plan
blamed and discouraged me.
Despite that, I could not prevent myself from going forward,
so much did this sentiment of trust
keep me from listening to what people were saying to put me off.
Nevertheless, despite this interior drive,
I wanted to know the divine will about the foundations of our work
and to use the most assured means for that, as God has set out in his Church.

This explains why I came to Rome at the beginning of 1840,
where our Lord placed his important people for governing his whole Church.
I introduced myself without authorization or letters of recommendation,
and I sought no protection to have my plans given preference
or to solicit their acceptance.
I was coming to know the divine will
and I feared, above all else, to have my own prevail.

(N.D., VI, 38) 1844.

Apropos of the following letter written by Francis Libermann from Rennes to Mr Le Vavasseur, Fr Tisserant wrote: When one undertakes a work that has no support except in God, one must expect that human wisdom will treat us as fools and as people who have lost their reason.

Develop great sentiments of confidence and love towards God,
and act forcefully.
Do not be discouraged by the difficulties which will be placed in your path,
reproaches,
false judgements which will be made about you and your line of action
in everything you do.
You will be taken for a weak-minded person, imprudent, proud,
and they will say a thousand things about you,
not only in your own country but even in Paris.
Respectable people will disapprove of you, blame you,
and treat this plan as a young man's dream, foolishness,
and look on it as impossible.
But do not allow yourself to be discouraged or stopped, even temporarily.

Even if the wisest and most pious people oppose it,
persevere in your project before God,
for those who do not feel the interior movement of God
towards such a work
look on it as impossible because of the difficulties.
That is why you need to remain always in our Lord
in a great spirit of humiliation and love,
letting him act rather than acting yourself.
Follow the movements he gives you and the desires he implants in you,
in all gentleness, peace and love and in the deepest humility of your heart.

(N.D., I, 638) 1839.

It was on the historic day of his enlightenment, 28 October 1839, that Francis Libermann described what his Congregation would be, in prophetic terms which sprang from what he called, for his Creole friend and in all prudence, *his little light*.

I want something solid, fervent and apostolic,
all or nothing.
But all is a lot,
and weak souls will not be willing to give or do that much.
This can only please us.
We do not want weak souls in this totally apostolic Congregation.
We want only fervent and generous souls,
who give themselves entirely
and are ready to undertake and suffer everything for our Master's glory.
I think that all those who seem ready to give themselves to God in this holy work
will be disposed for everything,
and can only experience great spiritual joy

in seeing rules which demand the greatest perfection
and will lead them into the greatest holiness
and a more perfect dedication to their God.

(N.D., I, 662) 1839.

The spiritual portrait of the missionary is exacting and realistic at one and the same time. History would confirm how justified it was!

We need men devoted to the glory of God,
men determined to give up everything for him.
men who have already got the better of their principal defects
or who are at least in the process of doing so
and from whom there is much to hope.
Furthermore, we need people who are capable of suffering the greatest pains
and humiliations.
I know you will not find many like that,
who are already capable of suffering pains and humiliations patiently,
but they must at least have the ardent and sincere desire
to suffer all sorts of pains, afflictions and humiliations for love of God,
and they must be seriously trying to put up with them, as from now,
to be humble and conquer themselves in these circumstances.

Furthermore, it is essential that all those who wish to embark on this holy work
have a docile and pliable spirit,
be disposed to submit
to whosoever is given to them as superior,
and to obey with exactitude
both the superior who will be given them
and the rules which will be prescribed for them,

because, however things turn out,
you simply must live in community
and have solid order established among you.
If there was a hard and non-conforming person among you
he would be capable of stopping all the fruit you could produce.
Better be small in number, in full accord and very fervent,
than be a big number disunited.

(N.D., I, 648) 1839.

Now he was in Rome, putting up in an attic not far from Propaganda Fide, and just waiting!

I do not feel drawn to look for all these human supports;
anyhow I am not capable of procuring them.
I have presented my project;
if God wants it, they will know how to find me.
I will wait,
or else I will return as I came.

(N.D., II, 165) A witness 1868.

In this attic he composed the Provisional Rule as well as the Commentary on St John's Gospel, which has been called *a praying exegesis*. But the waiting and apparent inaction discouraged his companion, a seminarian from a wealthy family who had accompanied him to Rome and shown interest in his work. He left. Many of Francis Libermann's friends were disconcerted, so he wrote to them:

What! Are you going to give in to anxiety and discouragement
because a man leaves us,
a man who brought nothing but talents, a name and a fortune?

What is all this?
The works of God are not done that way.
God does not wish them to be attributed to human power,
his own power must be recognized in them.
When obstacles appear
we must go forward, forward all the time,
stay at the foot of the wall, wait until it falls,
and then continue on.

(N.D., II, 160) A witness 1852.

The Secretary of Propaganda Fide gave an ambiguous reply: *You must be a priest first... before thinking of the missions.*

It was the most painful answer he could have given me,
for if he had given me a negative answer
I would have been quite happy with it,
because I would have looked on his word as our Lord's
and withdrawn immediately.

(N.D., II, 152) 1840.

He set off on foot for Our Lady of Loreto, where he remained a week, and came back by Assisi. On arriving back — another of Mary's favours! — he learnt that the Bishop of Strasbourg was willing to ordain him a priest and that Propaganda Fide had accepted his project for the Work of the Blacks. In point of fact he was ordained priest at Amiens in the bishop's private chapel on 18 September 1841. Only one person, the bishop's assistant, was present.

I want to tell you of the great mercy and goodness of Our Lord Jesus Christ
towards an unworthy servant who does not deserve so much as to pronounce his holy name.

I have just been ordained priest this morning.
God knows what I have received on this great day,
and only God knows,
for neither human being nor angel can conceive it.
All of you pray to him that it will be for his greater glory,
for the salvation and sanctification of souls,
and for the building up of the Church,
that I have reached the priesthood.

(N.D., II, 497) 1841.

A priest is something great...

A priest is something great!
He is a man who must possess all the perfections of our Lord,
for the greatest quality Jesus was clothed with
was his divine priesthood.
That is why I find it a truly dreadful thing
to see so few priests really holy.

A natural priest seems to me truly stunted;
he has the external semblance of a priest
but not the life.
He represents Jesus our Master
but he is small and despicable all the time before God and his holy angels.
A priest should have nothing of a human way of life about him,
he ought to act and behave no more as a human being,
but the spirit of Jesus Christ should be
all his movement and life.

(L.S., I, 484) 1838.

A young Congregation on the old trunk of the perennial mission

Founder of the Work of the Blacks

The Mass which Francis Libermann celebrated in Paris on 25 September 1841 in the church of Our Lady of Victories, in the midst of his first missionary companions, is considered as the foundation Mass of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Mary was honoured under this title by the archconfraternity of that church, it was to her he consecrated his Society, it was she who, in the tenderness of her *apostolic* heart, would preside over the mysterious *victories over the spirit of darkness* into which he was sending his friends! Fourvière, Saint Mary Major, Loreto, Our Lady of Victories – his way was enlightened and enriched all along by Mary's power.

The novitiate at La Neuville on the outskirts of Amiens opened two days later. The *fioretti* of La Neuville have the contagious freshness of first foundations. Many young people hastened to join; they slept in corridors or under the stairs. Good humour and frugality went hand in hand. *I simply must leave you,* Libermann wrote to one of his correspondents while dipping his pen into the common inkwell, *I have to go to the kitchen or we will have no supper this evening.* The novices' joy and fervour are equalled only by their father's affability and wisdom, as much at home with the providing or gardening as with talks on formation from the outpourings of his heart in the light of God.

Certain thoughts, counsels, sentiments which would keep coming back in his talks or under his pen all the rest of his life have their basis in this general atmosphere.

For example, in a letter to Eliman, King of Dakar, *and to all the chiefs*, he expressed his great love for Africa. He would never be able to go there and would always regret this.

My heart is yours;
my heart is for the Africans, wholly for the Africans.

I am Jesus' servant.
He wants me to love everyone as he loves everyone,
but he inspires me with a love more intense, more tender, for his dear brothers,
the black people.
And because I love the black people so tenderly
I wish to be taken up all my life long
with bringing happiness to the people of Africa,
not only their happiness on earth
but above all in heaven.

(N.D., X, 24) 1848.

The missionary is one who is sent (*missus*). It is Jesus who sends him as he was sent by his Father. Since it is Jesus himself who pursues his work of salvation through the missionary it is indispensable that the latter remain united to him who sends him.

Jesus Christ sends us as he was sent.
Our mission is his.
It is Jesus who lives in those he sends, who suffers in those he sends,
who draws souls to God his Father and communicates his graces to them through those whom he sends.
But so that Jesus may live in those he sends,
and do all things in them and through them,

they must live in him,
be united to him in their life, their sufferings and their apostolic action.
If this is not so, they have only a semblance of being sent by Jesus Christ,
and are not so really.

(E.S., 374) 1836?

Fidelity in allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit of Jesus will permit this same Spirit to constitute the missionary as a witness of Jesus Christ, a redeemer and saviour with him.

Like Jesus, who was sent by his Father and lived for his Father,
likewise you, who have been sent by him,
must live for him and in the spirit of his holiness.
Jesus Christ your Saviour sanctified himself
and sanctified his sufferings for the salvation of souls,
and thus he begot them in pain
and sanctified them in truth.

The holiness of Jesus Christ must reside in the missionary,
a holiness which ought to be grounded in his heart all the time
and reproduce itself in his activity and sufferings.
Thus after the example of Jesus Christ
he brings forth souls for God in truth
because he communicates to them the Saviour's life which is in himself.

(N.D., XIII, 405) 1851.

Fr Libermann always closely linked the apostle's holiness and the fruitfulness of his zeal. He saw no dichotomy between religious life and apostolic life, the two make but one.

It is impossible for you to sanctify yourself
without working might and main for the salvation of the souls entrusted to you,
and it is scarcely possible for you to sanctify those souls
while neglecting yourself.

How important this reflection is!
For priests often think of their own salvation alone,
and souls are somewhat neglected.
They have more zeal for recollection
and the other virtues which tend to their own sanctification
than they have for the salvation of souls.
This is a great fault.
Once we are priests we belong to ourselves no more,
we belong to souls
according to the divine will which makes use of us in their service for his good pleasure.
Others, on the contrary,
under the pretext of zeal for souls,
are entirely given to their ministry
without taking care of their own sanctification, which suffers thereby.
They do still more harm than the first group.
They must first procure the glory of God in their own soul.
Furthermore, if they are holy
they will save many more souls with a lot less activity.
So one must be done and the other not omitted.

(N.D., II, 472) 1841.

The Provisional Rule of the Congregation, written in Rome, was published at Amiens. He used to give a commentary on it to the novices, insisting on the fundamental texts, visibly inspired, which are the charter of the missionary spirit. Here is one of the most revealing:

The apostolic life is nothing else
but the full life of love and holiness
which the Son of God led on earth to save and sanctify souls,
and by which he was sacrificed to his Father's glory.
This heavenly life is founded on the death of the natural man
with his concupiscences and affections.
It is the foundation which they will try to lay in their souls
so as to build true apostolic zeal solidly thereon.

(N.D., II, 290) 1840.

His insistence on the holiness of the apostolic person is born of his perspicacity of the ways of God and the very history of evangelization in the Church.

God seems to want us to save this country
rather by our own sanctification than by our zeal.
I mean that God's will
is that we take our place in the midst of these peoples
while leading a completely holy life,
giving quite particular attention
to the practice of the priestly and religious virtues –
humility, obedience, charity, gentleness, simplicity,
life of prayer, abnegation, and so on.
This is to be the object of all our care.

In no way will it impede the exercise of our apostolic zeal
but, on the contrary, it will give it more consistency and perfection.

This is the approach followed by the holy religious
who converted Germany and England,
it is the approach God wants us to follow,
the only one which will draw down his blessing.

(N.D., XIII, 354) 1851.

Libermann never hid from his novices the difficulties awaiting them. On the contrary he always linked the prior necessity of the cross to a Resurrection-experience of renewal.

All works undertaken and carried out in the Church
have met these same difficulties,
and often even greater ones,
and yet these difficulties did not dismay the apostolic people
who undertook them,
and did not prevent them from carrying them out
with as much steadfastness as success.
It has always been the order of providence
to manifest its maternal care in the midst of obstacles,
and the best results
have normally been produced after the greatest difficulties.

So it would be wanting to deviate from the ordinary ways of providence,
it would be wanting to perform a human work,
to want to undertake nothing except with an absolute guarantee of success.
and the assurance that all difficulties will be smoothed out.

It seems to me that this is the general line
that the saints of all times have taken.

(N.D., VIII, 92) 1846.

To those whom he was sending out as missionaries to be the servants — *the slaves*, he sometimes says — of the most abandoned, he spoke as the last of all, himself a servant.

Good and dear brothers,
do not despise the word of your poor wretched father
because it has not pleased God to endow him as abundantly as you
with the gift of suffering.
Considering the order of grace in this world,
I am more than you
and you should listen to my voice as God's,
for it is he who speaks in me;
his grace is with me, it gives life to my words,
always for the same purpose, your sanctification
and that of the souls for whom he immolates you.

In the order of glory, when we have the joy of being admitted there,
things will be different.
There you shall be more than I,
because you now have the happiness of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ,
source and principle of our sanctification.
Then his word will be fulfilled,
'The last shall be first and the first last'.

(N.D., XIII, 404) 1851.

He gave the superior of the Blue Sisters of Castres some excellent advice for exercising her office of superior with wisdom. He was giving exactly the same advice to those among his own men who would become superiors of new mission communities far away.

About being superior,
a general rule which covers everything
is that one has not come to be served but to serve.
You are the first servant of your community.
Your service differs from that of domestic servants in this
that you must sacrifice yourself for your masters,
an ordinary domestic servant owes only his or her work.
Our Master said,
'I have not come to be served but to serve and to lay down my life'.
These words contain all the duties of superiorship,
it is to superiors he addresses them.
You may object,
'But does my authority not have to be respected?'
I reply,
It is not your own authority that is to be respected
but indeed our Lord's, which is in you
and which you represent before your Sisters,
while still being their very poor servant.
You do not deserve the respect, Jesus alone deserves it,
and it is he alone whom your religious should respect in you.
Now if your mind keeps working
on how to have the authority which Jesus gave you respected,
self-love, inborn in our souls as a result of sin,

will keep bringing you to the point of wanting your own person respected,
and imperceptibly the respect due to the sovereign Master of heaven and earth
will be drawn towards a very poor and useless creature.

But how can one be a servant
and also have Jesus Christ's authority respected?
By living as he did.
Let your conduct be holy, modest, serious, peaceful, even, uniform, humble,
renounce yourself in everything,
never give the appearance of seeking yourself in anything,
be dependent on God alone.
Acting thus,
you will have no need to seek the esteem of your Sisters,
you will not even have to think of it.
You will tell me
that I am giving you the opposite principles to what superiors are ordinarily given.
I do not think so,
but I want the same results to be obtained without having to be worked for.

(N.D., IV, 293) 1843.

Community life is based, he said, on union of minds and hearts. While he commented on the Provisional Rule, the novices were taking notes of his teaching. The most faithful notes are Fr Lannurien's, which have been collected into a valuable commentary from which this passage is taken:

The union which should reign among us
is to be a union of mind and heart.

A union of mind:

this contains three elements and as it were three degrees.

I Not to wish to subject others to our ideas,
especially not to become annoyed when they do not think as we do.
To want to impose one's opinions on others is tyranny.
But, you will say, he is mistaken, it will do him harm.
I reply:
if you become angry with him, will that not harm him more?
This fault of wanting to impose one's own opinions, no matter what,
comes from rigidity mingled with self-love.

II To have a certain disposition and facility for coming round to the opinion of others.
This does not mean that when we see the truth
we must follow another's error,
but only that humility and charity
ought to win us over to our brother's judgements;
humility, because it makes us mistrust our own judgement,
charity, because it is opposed to self-love,
which is often the reason that we do not judge in a healthy way,
it prevents us from seeing the truth
when truth does not conform to our first sentiments.

III To act as if one was of the other's opinion,
when one foresees no problems from that;
since self-love will always be able to find problems,
here again we must
be humble and animated by a real charity
to decide if problems really do exist.

A union of heart:
This consists in the mutual and intimate affection
we should have for one another. *(C.R.P., 125) 1845.*

Libermann had a marvellous way with people. On his great art of guiding people he admitted in confidence one day:

All right, what is the most powerful means I use for guiding people?
It is to tolerate in each one
the faults that I foresee I can do nothing about,
sometimes putting up with the most unseemly manners and the most uncouth,
above all leaving each one in his condition
and trying to bring him to perfection in that condition.
Be quite sure that nothing is ever accomplished in this line
by force, contradiction or resistance,
but also on the contrary that everything is accomplished and obtained
by support, tolerance, gentleness and calm.
I am telling you everything.
I do not mean that one succeeds in getting people to lose
their natural character and way of living,
nor even all the faults of that way of living,
but one wins all that can possibly be won
and puts to good use those people who were reduced to nothing by the opposite approach.
For example,
if you wanted to make Fr Arragon moderate, polished, amiable in his manners,
you would be undertaking an impossibility,
it would be easier to stop the sun in its course!

Leave each one, then, in his condition and way of living.
God made them as they are,
they are disposed to do everything for the best.
You must encourage them and they will do it,
each according as it is given him from on high.

Be master, then, of your own soul
and you will be master of the whole world.

(N.D., XIII, 113) 1844.

At the heart of every community is forgiveness, along with mutual support, gentleness and humility. How often he would have to fight against all forms of *rigidity* in some apostles!

Be full of affection, gentleness and openness with superiors
in order to make their burden easier to carry.

Live together in union and in the most perfect peace of charity.
Support one another mutually,
put up with your faults,
ease the pain for one another,
comfort your confreres,
do not judge them, love them
and be gentle towards them even when they happen to annoy you.

When you happen not to be of the same opinion as your confreres,
lose your own judgement in the general opinion.
Tenaciousness to one's own ideas is one of the greatest evils
for people who ought to live together
in the peace and charity of Jesus Christ.

Avoid inflexibility in your judging,
in your words, in your desires, in your conduct.
Nothing good can ever come from rigidity.

(L.S., IV, 458) 1847.

The young members would be setting out to live in new countries where they would run the risk of being associated with the colonizing people of the time. He put them on their guard against all forms of preconceived judgements, with complete independence of mind, in the charity of God.

Do not easily give ear to what the people who travel up and down the coast say,
when they tell you about groups of people they have visited,
even if they have stayed there several years.
Hear what they have to say,
but do not let their words influence your judgement.
These people examine things from their own point of view,
with their own bias,
they would falsify all your ideas.
Hear everything and remain peaceful within yourselves,
examine things in the spirit of Jesus Christ,
with an independence of every influence and every bias whatsoever.
Be filled with, and animated by, the charity of God
and the pure zeal which his spirit will give you.
I am sure that you will judge our poor Blacks very differently
from all those people who talk about them.

(L.S., IV, 463) 1847.

In Haiti, just as in Bourbon, Mauritius and Africa, racial prejudices were tenacious. Fr Libermann roundly classified these prejudices as *ridiculous*.

If we had reached the point
of forming an establishment in the Republic (of Haiti),
I am sure that our success would have been complete.
After a few years we could have furnished the world
with proof of how wrong is the bad faith
of those who shamelessly calumniate a large section of the human race.
By that very fact we would have destroyed the ridiculous prejudices
which have unfortunately coloured
the ambition and interest of a handful of people,
to the loss of so many millions of souls created in God's image
and bought back by the blood of Jesus Christ.
I am convinced that our success would have been complete,
and that we would have made those who defame the African race see
that not to have white skin
is not less to be children of God than they,
that they have no less uprightness of soul,
that they are no less capable of receiving the faith, a sound morality,
the true principles and practices of civilization;
in a word, that colour gives no inferiority in anything.

(N.D., VIII, 334) 1846.

Climate can also be a factor of irritation or bitterness, no less than the daily unpleasant occurrences in the ministry. Patience is indispensable for success! Libermann offered it as an apostolic virtue of the first order.

The climates in which you live act strongly on the sensitivity and imagination.

You will be more inclined to be agitated, to become soured, to be irritated than before.
Yet it is essential that you preserve in your souls
Christian gentleness, calm, longanimity and moderation.
Be faithful
and you will advance greatly in holiness.

A strong and truly apostolic soul
is always calm, gentle, unshakable
in the midst of pains and contradictions.
It is never sad, sullen, agitated, abrupt, soured, taciturn,
nor a burden to itself and its neighbour.
All these faults are the affair of feeble souls, lovers of themselves,
who do not know the virtue of the cross of Jesus Christ,
and who, above all, do not wish to have part in it.
They are subject to the various pressures they are under,
and cannot become independent of them.
When everything is going according to their taste, according to their desires and their own views,
they live in sweet peace
and imagine they are in solid and perfect apostolic virtue.

In this time of peace
the valour of the soldier of Jesus Christ cannot be known.
To be in peace because nothing disturbs you
is not a proof of great apostolic strength.
The time of peace is given to prepare for war,
since war is the lot of the apostolic person.
If you knew, my very dear confreres,
what the value of patience is among the apostolic virtues

you would get to work with all the strength of your soul to obtain it.

If you can be patient now
you are sure of success, of a solid and stable success.
Be sure that what is carried off by onslaught
is neither solid nor lasting.

(L.S., IV, 458) 1847.

When we are thwarted by people's bad temper there is no cure but flight! To take refuge in the heart of Jesus! For his part, Libermann gave them the Master's most frequent word in the gospel: 'Fear not!'

Do not be surprised
if people judge you, condemn you and thwart you unceasingly.
By venting their bad temper on you they will be more peaceful with others.
Look on yourself as a dishcloth in the house,
a dishcloth in which everyone wipes his hands.

When you have had your fill of gall and resentment
go and stand before Jesus.
Let yourself fall on his heart and pour out your soul into this heart.
Fear not.

(N.D., IV, 269) 1843.

He recommended his missionaries to learn the local language, to respect local culture, to found establishments of schools and boarding departments, and above all to form catechists.

We propose to your Excellencies to give bishops
the power to confer tonsure and minor orders on catechists,
even when they are not intended for the priesthood.

In certain localities,
of unsuitable climate for a European priest to live there,
and during such time as there are not enough indigenous priests
to fill those positions,
these men as clerics in minor orders
could replace them up to a point.

(N.D., VIII, 246) 1846.

I believe we must use all possible means to form an indigenous clergy. This indigenous clergy will give life to what the missionaries begin. **He insisted constantly on this necessity.**

To form an indigenous clergy
is the most useful and important thing
to which we must attend with all our might.
I believe it is not possible to have good results without that.

(N.D., VI, 276) 1844.

First missions

I believe that the apostolic spirit consists rather in extending the boundaries of the Church than in making a little section perfect.

Bourbon, Haiti, Mauritius, Dakar, Grand-Bassam, Assinie, Guinea, Gabon — there was the bustle of departure for the missions in apostolic enthusiasm. Fr Laval was the first to leave, for Mauritius. *How fortunate he is*, wrote Libermann, *to have the first-fruits of the works the Lord is reserving for us.* Alas! Prudence did not always go hand in hand with zeal, and the first missionaries to set out died one after the other from African fevers, with the words on their lips, *In life or in death we are for the Lord and for Mary! O unhappy Guinea*, wrote Fr Libermann, *I believe I am carrying the whole country in my heart.* When they learnt of the disaster at La Neuville, all the novices, one after another, came knocking at his door, asking to be sent out as replacements. *I had to forbid them coming to my door, to stop them from persecuting me about this.*

Other volunteers came forward for the mission, still more numerous. Their graves are there for all to see in the cemeteries of Africa. They nearly all gave their lives in the fulness of youth! From this extraordinary epic, Fr Libermann drew conclusions for the future. *While trusting completely in the divine mercy, let us take all precautions to succeed... Size up things and act with prudence. Be strong and courageous, full of trust in God, but also prudent and sensible.*

Little by little, trained in the indispensable needs of hygiene, food and medical precautions, they got a foothold in Africa, organized their central communities along the coast, and penetrated towards the interior. Then they established the first heads of missions and vicars apostolic. Wherever he could keep in touch with his missionaries — notwithstanding the delays in the post — he would continue advising them from afar, sending his long letters to the four corners of the globe, thousands of them! He mixed warnings, encouragements, exhortations with those practical details which as a true Jew he was always admirably able to foresee! The whole constitutes an anthology which remains relevant for us today.

He introduced community as essential. The novitiate was over and the apostles were reaching their respective missions. They simply must live in community, it was an indispensable condition of fervour and apostolic fruitfulness. Starting from community they would prepare their individual treks or safaris into the interior, but always to return to community afterwards to regain their physical and spiritual strength. It was an important aspect of his missionary strategy!

During the novitiate it is something like rowing a boat.
Then on becoming an apostle one sets out to sea
and the sails have to be unfurled
because it is now a boat magnificently laden.
The apostles are once more in the world but they are not of the world.
Nevertheless, so that our missionaries may also have the external grace
to strengthen them against the external world,
we have community life,
which shelters them from the external rocks of the world,
as our Lord's grace shelters them from the world's spirit.
This community life has been adopted in the Congregation as something essential,
with the express intention of forewarning the missionaries against exterior dangers
and to maintain them in the religious fervour which gives life to the apostolate.

(N.D., XIII, 709) 1851.

In a particularly fine letter to the community of Dakar and Gabon he asked his missionaries to be true men of community and truly apostolic men, for they were the pioneers, and their sins, like the fruits of their holiness, would be *original* sins or fruits.

As I used to say to you in the novitiate,
and I repeat again here and now:

your sins would be original sins,
and your virtues contain a power and altogether special graces.
God founded his work on his all-powerful will and mercy,
he vivifies it with his grace and charity —
a foundation which will last forever, I am confident,
and a spirit we will come back to unceasingly.
But it is not less true that he has chosen you to be the first stones of the building.
If the first stones of a building are not well placed,
all the others will be crooked.
You can be certain that if you have the misfortune to take a wrong bent
those who come after you will make it worse still,
while, on the contrary,
by persevering and advancing unremittingly in that happy fidelity
with which you are corresponding to divine grace,
you will acquire a powerful influence over those who come after you,
and you will have a good share of all the fruits of fervour and holiness,
as well as of the salvation and sanctification of souls, which they will yield.

(L.S., IV, 455) 1847.

To a seminarian who desired to become a missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary and who was troubled about his weaknesses and faults, Libermann described his Congregation in Pauline terms. One thing alone was important: *to allow God to act according to his good pleasure, it is up to him to do everything; and to remain at his disposal.*

Altogether we are a poor lot
brought together by the Master's will,
which alone is our hope.

If we had powerful means to hand we would not accomplish much good.
Now that we are nothing, that we have nothing and are worth nothing,
we can form great projects,
because our hopes are not founded on ourselves
but on him who is all-powerful.
You know these words of St Paul,

'God chose... those who are nothing at all, to show up those who are everything' (I Cor., 1:28)

'For it is when I am weak that I am strong' (II Cor., 12:10)

– by trusting in him who is my strength.
He will be my strength if he finds me very weak;
he simply must, he is sovereignly wise.
Now if he uses an instrument incapable of itself
to serve for the work he puts it to,
he must put his own capability into it.

(N.D., IV, 303) 1843.

The community of Cape Palmas in Africa was waiting for reinforcements. Libermann promised some, for the novitiate was quite full. He told his lay Brothers that he was sending them the rule which concerned them, and he invited them to esteem the greatness of their vocation. Having started as a Society of priests, the Congregation would henceforth contain another order of members, the coadjutor Brothers.

Take courage, my dear Brothers,
devote yourselves to the glory of God and the salvation of so many poor souls.
You have, now and in the future, much to suffer.
Remember that it is for God you suffer,
who will recompense you a hundredfold in this world
for all the sacrifices you make for love of him.

Each pain offered for the salvation of souls may save many.
Perhaps that is the hundredfold promised.
Remember that the sovereign Master suffered all the time,
and with unheard of tortures, for the world's salvation.
Disciples of Jesus Christ, do not seek to be better treated than your Master.
Never be dismayed by the difficulties you experience,
they must never discourage you.
You do not come in your own name,
it is not you who are doing the work, but he who sends you.
You are not alone, he is always with you if you are faithful.
Do not be pusillanimous, then, or weak in faith.
An apostle of Jesus Christ can never be beaten by obstacles.

(N.D., VI, 3) 1844.

Implantation of the local Church, inculturation of the Christian message, adaptation to local people and customs, *apprenticeship* of the language as the vehicle of culture, respect for individual freedom — these are sacred principles of missionary activity. They are to be found particularly in his 1846 Memorandum to Propaganda Fide, his *great plan of the apostolate*. He would come back on them constantly in his letters to the African communities.

Do not judge by first impressions.
Do not judge according to what you have seen in Europe,
according to what you have been used to in Europe.
Rid yourselves of Europe, of its customs and spirit.
Become Black with the Blacks,
and you will judge them appropriately;
become Black with the Blacks,
to form them appropriately, not in the European fashion,
but leaving them what belongs to them.

Be to them as servants should be to their masters,
to the ways and styles and customs of their masters,
and this in order to bring them to perfection, to sanctify them,
and make of them, little by little, a people of God in the end.
This is what St Paul calls making oneself all things to all,
so as to win all for Jesus Christ.

(N.D., IX, 330) 1847.

At the same time as the mission of Guinea was getting under way, his first confrere and confidant, Fr Le Vavasseur, from Bourbon, struck with neurasthenia, wanted to leave the Holy Heart of Mary Congregation for another Congregation. Fr Libermann would finally succeed in holding on to him, but what a trial for him were the violent criticisms of the passionate Creole!

I needed this affliction.
For some time our great mission of Guinea was taking a new turn;
new graces were reserved for us.
There was a danger that this sudden prosperity would harm me.
A counterweight was called for to keep my equilibrium.
God's hand placed this counterweight in my soul.

(N.D., IX, 130) 1847.

This description of a soul in full self-possession is his own portrait. He wrote it to a community in Africa. In the midst of so many occupations nothing could shake him.

A soul truly dead to itself and truly handed over to God
feels a certain pain when it is at peace.
It almost regrets seeing everything going according to its tastes.

When it achieves success it is humble, calm and moderate,
it does its duty with perseverance and fidelity,
it consolidates what it has done.

In times of storm, of lack of success,
it knows how to wait for God's moments,
it takes care not to be discouraged;
sadness never, irritation never, spite never,
neither against itself nor against others.
It always remains true to itself; filled with God, it can be patient like God.
It does not wish for success greater or more quickly than God wishes it.
It examines a state of affairs with calm and in the spirit of God,
it acts according to its lights and the strength it obtains from on high,
and leaves its Master the care of bringing its works to fruit
according to the measure of his mercy for them.

(N.D., IX, 328) 1847.

How can a person of action remain united to God? By *practical union*, an expression he coined in the last months of his life. He wrote, *The essential thing is to live all day long in practical union with God, not only by accomplishing his holy duties but also by exercising a gentle and peaceful vigilance over oneself and by acting in everything conformably to God's good pleasure, in a spirit of faith and love* .

Action or practical union
consists in divesting oneself of natural impressions
to open one's soul to divine impressions.
As long as the soul is a slave to its natural impressions
it is like an opaque body,
leaving no point of entry for the supernatural light of truth.

On the contrary, as soon as we master these natural impressions
and are completely centered on receiving the divine communications and acting on them,
then our soul becomes spiritual and transparent.

Then we have a superabundance of truth,
we breathe truth, we feed on it,
we see the things of God effortlessly and clearly,
because our soul is in its element, the divine light.
Contemplative union and practical union have to be worked for conjointly,
for their mutual perfection and unity,
with a view to forming the complete life.

One can have distractions in prayer without ceasing to be united to God.
Sometimes we are in a passivity which makes us think that the process is not working, that we are fettering God's work.
Well, this is when the divine action is most efficacious,
since it has more control over us and is acting almost alone.
Our whole being must be united to God,
and that can only be done by practical union.

(N.D., XIII, 699) 1850.

He wrote to two missionaries who had gone to Australia: ***I am sending this letter in the same box as a mould for hosts, with a little note attached explaining how to use it. What I say for one is for the other, since you are only one heart and one soul.***

How much I would love to have a few hours among you,
to forge Jesus' bond of charity more and more,

especially if you have been failing in that.
But what am I saying?
You have no need of a poor man's presence,
the Spirit of Jesus is among you,
he unites you in his charity
and will unite you more and more in his love
which embraces in his heart all who belong to him.

(N.D., VIII, 352) 1846.

When one of his friends, a superior of a senior seminary, was surprised that a distinguished and cultured young man was being taken away to go *to evangelize the Blacks*, Libermann took the occasion to reply with the greatest frankness.

The phrase you used has re-echoed to the bottom of my being:
'What a massacre it will be to snatch this young man
from France
to bring him with you to evangelize the Blacks!'
So all those who are fervent, generous, of fine character,
must stay in France.
And these poor abandoned souls,
for whom God is inspiring such generous sentiments,
must be let rush to hell in their millions!
Only the leavings, the ordinary souls, imbeciles,
people good for nothing much,
must be sent to save them.
No, this does not seem to me what God would want.

(L.S., II, 316) 1839.

PRODIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE SERVICE OF THE POOREST

1848 was the year of the Fusion of the Holy Heart of Mary Society with the Holy Ghost Congregation. The latter had numerous missionary territories with legal recognition, but found itself short of personnel. Thus a more extensive field of apostolate was opening for the young Holy Heart of Mary Society. Once again, and notwithstanding the criticisms of many of his own companions, Libermann abandoned himself to divine providence. He wrote: *It is God who has led us in all this affair. We will lose our name among men, who no doubt will call us Spiritans; we do not hold to the word but to the facts. We will not cease to belong to Mary or to be priests of her most holy heart; we cannot lose the title which begot us.*

But he did not intend to limit his apostolate to the French colonies. He dreamt of sending his missionaries to South Africa and also to the *three million helpless Blacks* in Brazil. He obtained information on the situation of the Blacks in the United States. He turned his attention to orphanages, to labourers, beggars, prisoners. He received and catechized the chimney-sweeps of Paris. He set up the Society of St John for the sanctification of priests — his secretary noted forty-seven meetings of the Society, which many ecclesiastics attended. It was the period of creating colonial bishoprics, of numerous consultations with the government and the Holy See on this matter. He went as far as drawing up a treatise on Pastoral Activity and Law for the new bishops, just as he wrote the charming little treatise on the episcopacy for his own bishops. Nothing stopped him, he even set up a chaplaincy for the seaports!

He was now settled into the Rue Lhomond in Paris, the seat of the Holy Ghost Congregation, of which he was superior general. He drew up a definitive Rule in 1849. But he continued to visit the novitiate of the house at Gard near Amiens, where his students were living henceforth. One conference theme recurred frequently, the necessity of holiness for the missionary. And there was always his vast correspondence with each of his followers!

***'He sent me to preach the good news to the poor'* (Luke 6:18). *'They will be the advocates, the supporters and defenders of the weak and little'* (Provisional Rule).**

To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal.
Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at,
and in the missions we have chosen
the most wretched and abandoned souls.
Providence gave us our work for the Blacks,
whether in Africa or in the colonies;
incontestably,
these are the most wretched and abandoned populations down to our day.
We would also desire to work in France for the salvation of souls,
but still having the poor as principal goal,
without abandoning, all the same, those who are not.

(N.D., XIII, 170) 1851.

One of the finest chapters of his Commentary on the Provisional Rule is certainly the one he dictated on zeal. With his subtle spirit of discernment, he elaborated on the qualities of true missionary zeal.

A popular illusion about the nature of zeal
is to picture the zealous person
as someone always in movement,
always visibly effervescent, always beside himself.
This is the idea a great many people have
of St Francis Xavier, and wrongly;
for St Francis Xavier, although he had a heart burning with zeal,
must have been very calm;
he used to pray at great length, uniting himself intimately with God.

True zeal consists in pure burning charity,
and consequently it is not to be sought
in the imagination.
What distinguishes true zeal
from zeal which is only an effect of the imagination or of nature
is that true zeal
is accompanied by calm, gentleness, humility and constancy
in the midst of difficulties.
Imaginary zeal, on the other hand, puts the soul into difficulties
and inspires it with sentiments of haughtiness and vanity,
it invites those who possess it to compare themselves with the most outstanding apostolic men,
to make great imaginary projects, to build castles in the air,
to draw the esteem of others,
to speak about themselves.
It brings them to bitterness,
stridently inveighing against those who do evil,
and to discouragement if everything does not succeed according to the views
their imagination has fantasized.

True zeal, peaceable, humble and constant, sanctifies the soul,
it does not become annoyed
but tends to make us pray for souls who are in sin,
offering ourselves to God for them and taking on ourselves the pain of their crimes.
The other zeal does not sanctify.

(C.R.P., 150) 1845.

Libermann's custom of reflecting on events in the light of God has been noticed. Here he analysed the Guinea disaster for Bishop Kobès, one of 'his' bishops.

What strikes me most
is that God has given us responsibility for the mission of Guinea,
and gives us all a burning desire to convert that country,
and at the same time he stops us in the middle of our tracks,
and removes from us
exactly those persons who seem most capable of furthering your efforts and mine.
Out of the number of those whom it has pleased God to call to himself
in the nine years since he sent us to that unfortunate country,
there are eight or nine
who could have become excellent local superiors
and even principal superiors;
he leaves us only the less capable.

What are we to make out of God's action?
In due course he will make his plans clear.
Meanwhile
I believe I see that in all this his goodness is cutting us down to size,
getting us to see what our efforts are worth
and what value to attach to our own persons.
I assure you, my lord bishop, that I do not presume to become upset over these unfortunate events,
or over the awkward situations which result from them,
for I am convinced
that it all took place in a merciful plan for us and for this poor people we are responsible for evangelizing.

(L.S., IV, 680) 1851.

In the same letter he asked the bishop *to draw up an Instruction to the missionaries to teach them what God asks of their zeal and fidelity.* He invited him to encourage religious life among them.

These poor young men, having left their countries to be missionaries,
have always kept the notion:
'I am a missionary above all'.
Consequently, and quite unawares,
they do not attach enough importance to religious life
and give themselves over too much, I believe, to an external life.
Well then! If this conjecture is well founded,
it is important to enlighten these confreres
by getting them to see that in truth
the mission is the goal
but religious life is a means sine qua non,
a means which must hold all their attention
and be the object of all their concern.

If they are holy religious they will save souls,
if they are not they will do no good,
because God's blessing is attached to their holiness
and their holiness depends solely on fidelity to the practices of religious life.

I assure you that I have painful moments at times
when I think of the continual sufferings of these poor young men,
and the generosity with which they put up with them.
I say to myself that we have here the makings of great saints.
This tears my heart.

(N.D., XIII, 353) 1851.

The following was a confidential letter to a confrere who was present at the first Mass of the Congregation at Our Lady of Victories. Fr Libermann expressed his thoughts on the greatness of his missionary enterprise, but also on his immense trust in providence.

Be brave and do not get upset
if things do not go perfectly according to plan.
You see that I do not do what I wish.

Providence guides our work in spite of me,
for I assure you that if I followed my own ideas
I would have been on my guard against undertaking so much at once.
It frightens me, but what can be done?
Can I resist the will of God driving me with full force?
Our poor human prudence does not go far.

Perhaps my fears will change into thanksgiving towards the divine goodness
for having hustled us along.
To human views it is imprudent to undertake everything at once.
God will provide for what he obliges me to do reluctantly.
For the rest, my fears are not such
that I believe great harm will result that could damage the work substantially.
The most that could happen
is that we would be obliged to neglect one part,
even to abandon it, if that was necessary.
God will manifest his will, his plans;
we must not be headstrong in our ideas, nor stubborn.

If our poor prudence wishes to struggle against providence, it will go ill for it.
Our work has gone forward so headlong for two years
that I do not know what to make of it,
and I would regard it as a crime to resist what is happening.
We must let ourselves be led by providence.

(N.D., VI, 322) 1844.

'I can do all things in him who strengthens me' (St Paul).

If only easy things were to be undertaken in the Church,
what would have become of the Church?
St Peter and St John would have continued fishing on Lake Tiberias
and St Paul would never have left Jerusalem.
I can fancy that someone who thinks himself something
and counts on his own powers
may be stopped before an obstacle,
but when we count on our Master alone what difficulty can we fear?
We will stop only at the foot of a wall,
wait there with patience and confidence until there is an opening,
then continue on as if nothing happened.
That is how St Paul and the other apostles behaved.

(L.S., II, 457) 1840.

A month after the 1848 Revolution we find Fr Libermann trying to decipher the theological meaning of what happened. To a Sulpician who questioned him about the suitability of priests voting, he let it be understood that the clergy should keep up with the times.

You ask me if the clergy should take part in the elections.
I believe they should, they owe it to God, to the Church and to France,
and tomorrow I am going to have myself put on the voting lists
along with all those of us in the required circumstances.
If all the priests of France fulfilled this duty seriously,
and used all their influence
to procure a good choice for the legislature of the Republic,
we would have a good Constitution
and then a good form of executive government.

How much good could come from that!
I know well that elections are not an ecclesiastical work,
but we must remember that we are no longer now
in the order of the things of the past.
The evil of the clergy has always been, in these recent years,
to become fixed in the ideas of the past.
The world has gone forward
and the enemy has drawn up his batteries according to the state and spirit of the age,
and we lag behind!
It is essential to follow the world
while staying in the gospel spirit,
to do good and combat evil in the state and spirit of the present age.
We must attack the enemy's batteries where they are,
and not let ourselves dig in, seeking them where they no longer are.

To wish to remain cramped up in the old days,
and in the habits and spirit that ruled them,
is to bring our efforts to nothing,
and the enemy will grow stronger in the new order.
So embrace the new order with openness and simplicity
and bring the gospel spirit to it.
We will sanctify the world and the world will join us.

(N.D., X, 151) 1848.

Bishop Bessieux, pioneer of Gabon, would be a big name in missionary history. Fr Libermann often wrote to him on a friendly note; one senses his great tiredness in these lines.

The colonial bishops have been appointed.
Just at present I have a lot of work to get this business in order.

After that I will be more free,
and I will be able to begin writing again to the confreres in Guinea.
Let them be patient for two months more.
I presume that within two months the bishops will have set out
and then I will be free.
To place the colonies on a good footing
is a very important affair for the glory of God,
and if I do not deal with it seriously that will not happen.
So it is worth the trouble of dealing with it
and of making a little sacrifice of time after all the other sacrifices already made.

We all came together at the end of the year.
We had a plenary meeting to settle a lot of things.
The meeting lasted eight full days, with five hours of discussions per day.
After that we made our retreat in common,
during which I gave a daily conference.
I will write shortly to dear Fr Lossedat.
I am too busy now to have time to write
before today's mail goes out.
I was hoping to write these past few days,
but the migraine which has persisted for three consecutive days
left me in no condition to do so.
Today I am a bit better, fortunately.
Otherwise I do not see how I could write even to you.

(N.D., XII, 355) 1850.

Another correspondent he was on close terms with was Fr Le Vavasseur. At the time of his friend's *great temptation*, he disclosed the difficulties of his own task.

Since God placed me in this work
I have never had a moment of peace and consolation,
for my soul is blunted to all that could be pleasing and consoling to it,
while it is extremely sensitive to pain,
and the divine goodness has not spared me on that score.

Think what crushing pain it has to be
not to have a moment, a minute, in the day
to think of the salvation of my soul,
and yet you know well
that my most burning and continual desires
draw me towards retreat and solitude.

With such great horror of being in contact with the world,
I have a repugnance, sometimes almost insurmountable, to doing just that,
and yet I must.
I have great difficulty in conversing with people,
and I must be at it all the time.
From morning to night I have to give spiritual direction,
and I experience an extreme repugnance to do so.
I have to give spiritual talks all the time,
and the least subject for mental prayer that I am to give puts me in pain
three hours before the time to give it.
It seems that everything in me
is opposed to my staying in the state of things where I am.
Nevertheless
I would regard it as a crime even to entertain the thought.
God binds and chains me to this work — crucifying, but dear to my heart.

(L.S., IV, 275) 1846.

He often compared himself with his missionaries. ***Happy you missionaries whose every moment is taken up with work for the salvation of souls! You are more to be congratulated than pitied; it is a great happiness which I do not have.***

As for myself, I am like the secretary of a great banker.
He deals with figures,
he regularizes accounts,
he tots up millions,
he arranges fine commercial speculations,
but it is all purely speculative for him.
Others pile up the amounts he has calculated,
take the fruit of his speculations.
He leaves his office and sometimes may not have a penny in his pocket.
That is my position. I tot up, I theorize, I arrange what you win,
and my own pockets are empty,
happy if at the great day our Lord has mercy on me!
For, most certainly, I shall arrive without merit,
while you others are saving souls — what happiness!

(L.S., 254) 1845.

'I have stayed up too far into the night to write to you.'

It is after midnight.
Everyone in Paris is asleep
except me.
The street is quiet.

(N.D., IX, 189) 1847.

MYSTIC AND MAN OF ACTION

The Christian mystic is by definition the one who consciously lives the mystery of Christ. From the day of his baptism Francis Libermann lived in a close intimacy with Christ which was constantly deepening. What was remarkable about him — and would be in the future for all those who were providentially called to follow him — is that this deepening took place in the course of apostolic activity, and that intimacy and activity corroborated each other and fed on the same source: the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Far from being an obstacle, activity constrained him, on the contrary, to live more under the same Spirit's guidance which, in turn, made him love people with God's own heart. *The busier I am*, he said, *the more my union with God is strengthened*. Thus zeal became the fruit of his same burning love for God and those God confided to him, especially the poorest and most abandoned. God accomplished his work of salvation at one at the same time both in him and by him. The more he was *configured* to Christ the more he became a redeemer with him. He wrote: *There is no real greatness except in the all-heavenly life of divine love!*

This is the path of holiness, simple and luminous, that he opened up and traced out, according to his own interior experience, for those who were seeking God in the active life, and in an altogether special way for his missionaries of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Circumstances of life would vary, but the means, the steps and the end are the same!

Fr Libermann's letters are sprinkled with spiritual aphorisms which, like this one, are rich in thought.

A soul which wants to be God's
does not do what it wants.

(N.D., IV, 461) 1843.

This passage was written at his brother's house in Strasbourg while he was waiting for the bishop's decision on his admission to the seminary. It is typical of his habitual attitude of abandonment, as much in the interior life as in his missionary plans.

Our Lord wishes our business to drag on.
Every step I take must have its hitches and delays,
so that I learn to abandon everything into his hands
and rest in him in everything.

(N.D., II, 443) 1841.

***Providence, providentially*: in these words Libermann reveals the secret of his apostolate.**

We have kept along the way of providence up to now.
Providence alone has guided us.
I have never been able to put any plan into execution that I dreamt up myself,
while I have always brought to execution as if my magic,
in the midst of crosses and sufferings it is true,
everything which came our way providentially.

(N.D., XII, 199) 1850.

***Renouncement* is another word he often used. *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Mt., 16:24).**

Christian perfection
does not consist in a certain more or less elevated state of prayer,
but in a union of perfect love with our Lord,

founded on a complete renouncement of ourselves,
our self-love, our will,
our ease, our satisfaction,
and everything we prize.
The more perfect our renouncement the more perfect is our love.

(N.D., II, 133) 1840.

Another characteristic of his spiritual doctrine is to encourage a positive looking towards God rather than a *turning in on oneself* all the time.

Pay attention to a maxim which I will give you,
I believe it to be of the greatest importance in the spiritual life:
We must seek less to know what we are failing God in,
than to apply ourselves peaceably and lovingly to pleasing him
in all the movements of our soul.

(L.S., I, 115) 1835.

A few months before he died, disquieted by the too great activism of his missionaries, he reminded them of *the soul of the apostolate* in a little work entitled *Instructions to Missionaries* — a work never completed, unfortunately. This passage concludes the chapter on the necessity of holiness.

'I have come to cast fire on the earth.'
Wishing to produce this fire,
he will necessarily place burning torches
in the hands of those he makes responsible for lighting it.
Why then are there so few of these holy burning torches?

It is because there are few saints,
few souls united to God in the practical ways of their life.
Their torches, then, are doomed to remain extinguished,
at most they produce a match-flame.

This means that if those who are chosen to belong to God,
apostles of Jesus Christ,
remain lovers of themselves, earthly people,
obeying their own pride, senses, weaknesses, faults,
the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessarily refused them,
God's plans are aborted,
and the peoples remain in darkness.
Why and for how long will our evil nature go on inspiring our actions?
No, my God, this cannot be.
Come, Lord Jesus, come, stir up your servants and live in them!

(E.S., 494) 1851.

In a letter of great courtesy and affection, he spoke in the following terms to the people in Senegal

I do not have the honour of knowing you,
but I do know you are the first-fruits of a people
to whose salvation I am entirely dedicated
and whom I love with all my heart.

(N.D., VII, 331) 1845.

Trust and love are closely linked, trust *founded not on our holiness but on our Father's tenderness and mercy.*

Where there is trust
there also one can count on love,
and the greatness of the love can be measured by the greatness of the trust.

(N.D., VII, viii) 1839.

***Suaviter et fortiter, gently and strongly*. Libermann often underlined this double aspect of the Holy Spirit's action.**

Let everything be natural in you and come from the Holy Spirit.
Now everything which flows from this Spirit
is gentle, mild, modest and humble.
Strength and mildness, that is the divine action;
it is also a summary of all apostolic action.

(L.S., II, 468) 1840.

Respect for persons, respect for individual freedom, respect for consciences, and openness of heart to all without exception!

In general you must cultivate a liking for everyone,
whatever their opinions on religious principles
or their opinions of yourself.
You must, moreover,
leave them full freedom to think and act as they wish.

(N.D., IX, 248) 1847.

Presence to oneself. Self-possession in peace, without ever wanting perfection in others and so shattering them. ***The great saints acted like that, the little ones acted the opposite.***

Never embrace an idea with ardour,
and never take a resolution
except when you feel that the ardour and excitement of your mind have died down.
You may be certain too
that every time you are not master of your own thought
you are on the wrong track or are seeing things out of proportion
or are into a speculation that will turn out impracticable.

(L.S., IV, 621) 1850.

He wrote these lines to Fr Le Vavasseur, who had a character given to excesses. He offered his own example — he too could be violent. ***I gave sufficient proof of this during my seminary days,*** **he said.**

Be convinced of this, that to fail in the line of God's work
you have only to decide on the following way of acting:
'I will go straight to my goal and not bend,
I will act with force and power,
I will act with frankness and always tell people what I think of them'.
You will shatter yourself or shatter others,
you will pull down instead of building up.
Do you not think I could be as energetic as you,
as rigid and hurtful, as you seem to want me to be?
I would only have to wish it,
and perhaps I could be more so than you.

You must get what you can without breaking anyone,
or you will lose twenty times more than you win,
and in the last count, if we take note,
we will easily discover that we are far from perfection ourselves
by wishing it so absolutely in others.

(L.S., IV, 622) 1850.

In a commentary on Jesus' words to Nicodemus in St John's Gospel, *The wind blows wherever it pleases... but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going* (John 3:8), he formulated this admirable prayer.

O most holy and adorable Spirit of my Jesus,
let me hear your gentle voice.
Refresh me with your precious inspiration.
O divine Spirit,
I want to be before you like a light feather,
so that your breath may carry me where it will
and that I may not offer the least resistance to it.

(C.S.J., 89) 1840.

Your main business is to forget yourself. Act good-naturedly, with simplicity before God and the sole desire of pleasing him.

Let your holiness be calm, simple and humble,
the piety of a straightforward simple person,

who looks for neither great things nor little,
but who serves God in everything and at every moment
with the greatest sincerity and simplicity of heart.

(N.D., VIII, 126) 1846.

In the last year of his life he confided to one of his missionaries: *Now you have arrived at Grand-Bassam... The African people will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries, they have no need of them. It is the holiness and sacrifices of their priests which will save them.* And he went on, in particularly Libermannian accents:

Be holy as Jesus was holy.
This is the one and only way to redeem and sanctify souls.
May Jesus' Spirit animate all your actions,
may he form all the sentiments of your soul,
may he mortify and tolerate all turbulent vivaciousness of your mind,
all the hard or rigid sentiments of your heart,
in a word, all that is passionate and unruly in your soul.
May he communicate to your heart
the gentleness and humility of which the divine Master gave us the example.
Oh, how important is this gentleness and humility of heart,
and how few people possess it!

These two precious virtues,
which are the immediate fruit of a genuine and perfect love,
demand perfect interior abnegation
and great docility and submission to God.

All rigidity of will, all trusting in oneself and one's own ideas,
must disappear and be wiped out
if one is to possess these two magnificent virtues.
But also,
a missionary who would have these two virtues deeply graven in his soul,
and would make them enter into all his dispositions and ways of acting
– that missionary would be sanctified by the Spirit of God.
But he who lacks these two great virtues
is a monster in the apostolate of Jesus Christ,
even had he the zeal of St Paul and St Francis Xavier,
because the foundation is missing.
The Spirit of Jesus cannot animate him;
it is very frequently replaced by one's own spirit,
and sometimes by the spirit of darkness.

(N.D., XIII, 144) 1851.

GOD IS ALL, MAN IS NOTHING

To find the unifying thread of Francis Libermann's life we always come back to his last words on his death-bed, *God is all, man is nothing.*

Hear, Israel, the Lord is your God; you will have no other God but him alone. The young Jacob Libermann grew up with a deep faith in the God of Israel, which he wished to make his whole life revolve around. Later, when he came to know the God of Jesus Christ, the same absoluteness of God marked his faith as well as his spiritual teaching and missionary thought.

The expression, *man is nothing,* is a paradox when one knows the esteem, respect and love that Libermann nourished for people, in particular for the poorest and most abandoned. In fact the axiom wishes to highlight the fact that in the domain of faith and in sharing the life of God human beings are completely dependent on God and are invited to expect and receive everything from him. In Libermann's spirituality the expression gives us to understand that the more one leaves place for God the more one finds the way of freedom, peace and limitless happiness.

For the missionary, the total gift of his person to the needy is the obverse of the total gift of his person to Jesus Christ. *The strength with which the missionaries will act is not to be founded on their character or natural ardour but will come entirely from the grace of the divine Spirit and is drawn from intimate union with Jesus (Rule).*

Finally, missionary activity itself proclaims God's absoluteness. The Holy Spirit is the chief agent in missionary work, he alone can bring the believer to say, *Jesus is Lord.* There again the efficaciousness of the apostolic instrument consists in its readiness to let itself be guided totally by the Spirit of God. This attitude of mind, heart and act is essentially, then, an attitude of spiritual poverty, after the fashion of Mary, who magnified the Lord.

Francis Libermann closed his eyes in death on 2 February 1852; he was just fifty. At evening prayer in the chapel nearby, after the words of Simeon's prophecy had been recalled, *a light for the revelation of the nations,* the words of the Magnificat were being sung, *et exaltavit humiles: he has given glory to the poor of heart.*

In a letter to his brother, Samson, he gave a hint of his physical and moral sufferings, which were to stay with him to the end. He said that his work was not *a great project to be executed* but rather a close sharing in the cross of Christ for the salvation of *so many millions of abandoned souls.*

I can say frankly that if I had foreseen what I see now
I would have been unnerved,
and I would never have dared to undertake anything so great
and so much beyond my weakness.

Now I am trapped and I simply must continue on.
I will go forward until this body falls dissolved,
and then God will find an instrument more solid and willing
to do his work.

As for myself,
I hope he will have pity on me and show me mercy;
but I do not believe, my dear brother,
that this will be for the great things I have undertaken.

(N.D., VII, 5) 1845.

In one of his last messages he invited his companions to offer themselves as victims of redemption. To share in the redemption of Jesus, renewed in the Eucharist, he sees as an aspect of the missionary vocation. Yes, I offer my sufferings *for you, for all, for all of you, also for Guinea,* he would say before he died.

From now on I have the glory of being able to say
that I am as African as all of you and more so,
for I have all the African sicknesses.
Seven years ago I had dysentery.
Last summer began with a pernicious fever
and ended with hepatitis.
Still, even if it brings me to a state of collapse, I will write to all of you,
but it will have to be short letters!

Let your life be one of love, peace, zeal and mercy.
Live for God in this spirit and for these souls that are so poor.
What you cannot gain from these souls by your words
try to obtain by your prayers
and example full of the virtues of Jesus Christ, especially his mercy.
Suffer all that the divine goodness allows you to suffer,
in that spirit, with the desire to sanctify souls or at least draw down divine grace on them,
so as to have them enter into the way of salvation.

Be a poor victim,
offered by Jesus Christ to his Father for the salvation of these souls,
and the divine mercy will be your lot.
May God give you his peace and love.

(L.S., IV, 687) 1851.

His last words: 2 February 1852.

Be fervent, fervent, always fervent,
and, above all, charity, charity, charity above all.
Charity in Jesus Christ,
charity through Jesus Christ,
Charity in the name of Jesus Christ.

Fervour, charity, union in Jesus Christ.

I see you for the last time,
I am happy to see you.
Sacrifice yourselves for Jesus, for Jesus alone.

God is all, man is nothing.

The spirit of sacrifice,
zeal for the glory of God,
the salvation of souls.

(Process of Beatification; testimony of Fr Delaplace).

For a whole hour he was enraptured as if already in the beyond. Then he expired, saying:

My God, my God!

PRINCIPAL DATES IN FR LIBERMANN'S LIFE

12 April 1802	:	Born in Saverne.
24 December 1826	:	Baptised in Paris.
December 1826 - October 1827	:	Philosophy studies at Stanislas College, Paris.
October 1827 - December 1831	:	Seminary of St Sulpice.
December 1831 - July 1837	:	Seminary of Issy.
July 1837 - December 1839	:	Eudist novitiate at Rennes.
28 October 1839	:	The missionary call.
3 December 1839	:	Left Rennes for Rome.
6 January 1840 - 7 January 1841	:	Rome.
27 March 1840	:	Presented his first Memorandum to Propaganda Fide on the Work of the Blacks
18 September 1841	:	Ordained priest at Amiens.
21 September 1841	:	Mass at Our Lady of Victories in Paris.
27 September 1841	:	Opening of novitiate at La Neuville, near Amiens.
13 September 1843	:	Sent out the first seven missionaries to Guinea
15 August 1846	:	Presented his second Memorandum to Propaganda Fide on the civilization and salvation of the Blacks
26 September 1848	:	Fusion of his Society with the Holy Ghost Congregation
2 February 1852	:	Died at Paris.
19 June 1910	:	Declared Venerable by St Pius X.

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(All of these works are in French)

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